CHAPTER SEVEN

Getting to The Top

No new writer will totally enjoy Jon Franklin's advice on becoming great. You see, he offers no overnight formula. But he does offer a long-term plan, a plan good only for those willing to stick to it as he did. And for him it paid off with two Pulitzer prizes. He shares more of his secrets for writing dramatic nonfiction in his book *Writing for Story* (A Mentor Book, New American Library, 1986).

How Feature Writers Become Great

Jon Franklin

Like many of my students today, I came to journalism as an orphan child of fiction. I had literary ambitions and, given that, would far rather have written short stories. That, after all, had been the training ground for the Great Ones, for Hemingway and Steinbeck and all the rest.

But they lived in a kinder world. I was of the first luckless generation to enter my apprenticeship after the extinction of the magazine giants and the concurrent demise of the short story as a commercial form. The door had slammed shut in my face; there was no way I could feed a family writing short stories.

Hemingway's edict was clear, though: If you were going to be

a writer, you had to write. The ante, then as now, was to put a million words through your typewriter.

Worse, those million words had to be *published*. History was very specific on that point. Exposing your writing to editors and audiences and suffering the consequences was critical. If you got applause, you learned something; if you got raspberries and rotten tomatoes, which was more likely, you still learned something. You never learned much of anything when writing for yourself, which was why writing for yourself was to real writing what masturbation was to sex.

It was also necessary to get paid for what you wrote, a truth that in my case had to do with family responsibilities, but which also had larger implications. For, as W. Somerset Maugham had so acidly reasoned it through, writers were supposed to be smart, weren't they? And it was definitely not smart to starve. Therefore, the phrase "starving writer" was a contradiction in terms.

Given these realities I looked around and saw only one opportunity: journalism.

What? Covering muggings and traffic accidents, quoting politicians, sitting through town council meetings? Me? To a young man of my literary pretensions, this was not a very satisfactory answer.

Still, it seemed better than, say, selling insurance.

And besides, I told myself, I'd only be doing it for a while. I'd be slumming, but they'd see real quick what a fine young writer I was—too good for the newsroom, clearly. So they'd move me over to the feature desk. I'd make my reputation writing features. Then, when the time came, I'd take some time off and write the Great American Novel.

Facing Newsroom Realities

The ambience of the newsroom, of course, was anathema to all this.

The city room culture, then as now, was dominated by the Jack Webb school of journalism. Just the facts, ma'am. Who, what, when, where and why . . . always assuming there's time for a why.

Keep it under 14 inches. Can I quote that? Is that "Philip" with one "l" or two? *Whadda you mean you don't know? What kinda reporter are you?* Copy over!

Hey, Franklin! The cops have a floater at the inner harbor. Run down and find out what's going on! Take a photographer with you!

It was a brutal experience, the truth is, for one whose heart so warmly beat to the rhythms of Joyce, say, or Remarque. I responded in the only logical fashion, which was by trying to write it better than the normal stuff you see wrapped around the tire ads.

The gods aren't totally cruel, though. There always seems to be an editor around who does care, someone who will play mentor for a young writer. I had one . . . or maybe, come to think of it, he had me. In any event, one day early in my career he pulled me aside.

"Franklin," he said, "you tried to make this a great piece. Well, it's not.

"It could have been, maybe, but who knows? All I know is that it's not—and that there's only one way of making sure that you won't write a great piece, and you found it."

I stared at him, waiting. Well? Well?

"The only way to insure that you won't write a great piece," he said, articulating very precisely as though I was a seven-year-old, "is to set out to write a great piece."

I stared at him, bewildered. Now, what kind of thing to say was *that*? What did he mean?

Did he mean I was being too self-conscious? Should I spend more time being conscious of the self-consciousness of my copy? I could have grabbed him by the necktie!

What was I supposed to do? Tell me what to do!

He looked at me sort of sadly, for a long time.

"Nah," he finally said. "Nah. Forget it."

So what was one to make of that? Was it some kind of code? Was he supposed to understand?

Was he supposed to understand *any* of what was going on?

And what does one do, the young artist, when some fool of an editor strips off the whole first paragraph of his story, thus deleting a half-day's work and agony . . . and then sends the rest of the piece through mostly unchanged?

And how does the young artist react, in the secret, sensitive artistic center of his mind, when some Hun of an assistant city desk man laughs at him for the way he uses commas?

Well, one slinks away and licks the wound in private.

What the hell is so funny about my commas?

And what was wrong with the lead?

And then, in simple self-defense, one sets art aside for a day or two and learns everything there is to know about commas. That way,

the next time that idiot makes a snide remark about your commas you'll make mincemeat of him!

Life is cruel, though, because no word is ever said again about commas. There are instead other slings, arrows and humiliations.

Hey, Franklin! Where'd you get this sentence? Outta a textbook in some college library?

And so again the young writer slinks off, setting aside his literary ambitions for yet another little while, to spend the time instead brushing up on the niceties of sentence construction.

Hey Franklin! You got three paragraphs here. Gawd, they're beautifully written! Love the syntax! Get off on them verbs! Oh wow, lookit them metaphors! Only thing is . . . you don't say anything . . . yuk, yuk, yuk!

Oops.

By this time the writer is getting very good at, if nothing else, slinking away from the city desk. He plops down in his chair and glowers at the computer tube for a while. In his mind he dismembers that editor, starting with his fingernails. And then finally, and with resignation, he calls the story up, deletes the offending three paragraphs, and starts over.

It is a deadly combat, an endless circle, a Sisyphian task. You try, you rail, you try again, you fail, you try again, you succeed. Then, having succeeded, you reach farther . . . too far, oh Lord, too far . . . and you fail.

You lose track of small things, like the passage of years.

You forget why you came here in the first place, and what you were going to do. The place where once you were an artist is now nothing but a hollow ache. You ignore it.

In your struggle with the desk editors you arm yourself with knowledge and skill. You learn ever finer points of syntax, of sentence construction, of paragraph sequencing, of story structure. You learn to use character, and the specific but limited uses of the quote.

More and more, the problem becomes clear. There is a world out there, and in that world inexplicable things happen. You are supposed to understand these things, and represent them in a simple way in your copy. When the reader reads your copy, some more or less accurate picture of reality should appear in his mind.

Transitions, for instance . . . you once thought transitions were merely ways to get from point A in your copy to point B. But no. They are much more. They are the fault lines in the psychological world, the seams of reality. They can be sewn, and unsewn. James

and Faulkner showed us the techniques; even a humble newswriter can adapt them and use them.

The newswriter can defy everyday logic by flitting from one scene to another, or from one group of people to another, or even from one era to another. For example, in one paragraph I have kids walking down an alley, and then in the next paragraph I have a man in an adjacent house traversing the world.

Using these logic-defying stream-of-consciousness transitions in modern newswriting is a simple idea, a simple thing to say. You can argue with it, if you like. Discount it. Whatever. But the writer, this one anyway, spent two years analyzing the possibility. *Two years.*

They passed quickly, so absorbed was I. At the end, I was using stream-of-consciousness transitions. The editors loved them. Well, anyway . . . they loved them until I made the mistake of pointing out what I was doing.

(That's another rule you learn. Never, ever, tell your editor what you did. Stories are like sausages. Nobody wants to know what goes into them.)

But two years pass.

Time Keeps Moving

More years passed in wrestling with the subtle idea of *clarity*. What is clarity, exactly? Can clarity be truth? In an unclear world? Or is it a construct? How can you clearly describe something that's intrinsically unclear and, if you do, are you adequately re-creating reality . . . or are you writing fiction?

Then there were more years devoted now to the study of structure. Note, if you will, that the nut paragraph of an analysis story corresponds to the proposition or contention in an argument or the complication of the short story. And be aware, if you would write well, that good analysis stories also have summary bolt paragraphs at the bottom, the same way arguments have conclusions and short stories have endings.

And words, interestingly, are the inadequate measures of story length. Words are evocative and, being evocative, draw forth other words and images that are not to be seen on the printed page but exist there, nonetheless.

"Elephant," say, draws on the whole encyclopedia of ideas and images, from the parable of the blind men and the elephants to

childhood stories about Dumbo. "Elephant" is an evocative word with roots deep in the reader's mind, and the writer who uses it draws on those roots.

The word "neurotransmitter," on the other hand, is not evocative (unless you're a neurochemist). It can't be used without being explained, and the explanation is no good if it doesn't put down roots of its own so that, later in the story, it can be treated as evocative.

Words can be classified that way, for their evocative potential. They also have various degrees of emotionality. There are hot words and cool words, and all temperatures in between. And such meanings, of course, are often not in dictionaries. They come to the reader through his culture, and they change by the day. A writer must know these things, think of them consciously, keep track of what "elephant" means today and what it might mean tomorrow.

And there are levels of meaning, too, far above words. In fact, words turn out not to be the basic transmitter of message, after all. The unit of writing is the active phrase, which is to say a phrase or phrases constructed around a verb. "The sprawling oak tree" has no meaning unless it falls, or casts shade, or is used to hang a criminal; if it falls in the forest, and there is no writer to hear, it indeed makes no sound.

And patterns . . . there are patterns, and patterns of patterns, and patterns of patterns of patterns. We report on events, but patterns of events are even more interesting, and patterns of patterns can electrify. What are the stereotypes about your story, and why are they stereotypes? What does that tell you about your story? What are the accepted patterns by which your characters explain the world around them? How do those patterns render the characters' worlds predictable? What does their choice of patterns have to say to us, and our readers?

And when you really look at patterns . . .

This goes on, and on, and on. Writing is technique, techniques for seeing, techniques for remembering, techniques for analyzing, techniques for clarifying, techniques for writing itself. If you are a writer, these things are your life. You become totally absorbed in them, art forgotten, greatness no longer a viable concept.

And it is then that the Zen of it works its magic and you hear, out of left field . . . you hear someone yammering . . . some critic, perhaps, or some professor, saying, hey, look at feature writing! Look at what the new generation of writers are getting printed in, of all

things, newspapers! Lookit, lookit, lookit the new art form! Look at these writers! Some of them are great!

Art form?

Great?

Oh.

Let the Audience Worry About Greatness

And here I was, Jon Franklin, feature writer, writing this piece to address the question of greatness. And what did I do? I drifted off, into that other world, the writer's world.

Sorry.

Yes, I'd wanted to be a great writer. I wanted, in the yearning, egocentric secrecy of my heart, to be Shakespeare. It was only later that I learned that Shakespeare wrote not for art, but money . . . not to be cheered, but to be fed, 'cause the baby needed new shoes.

Greatness is a different matter—and one of very minor interest. You see, greatness, and the quest for it, has but one purpose. Setting out to write a great piece is the only surefire, 100 percent way to make sure you don't write a great piece.

"Greatness" is simply not a writer's word. It's an audience word, a word that an editor, a critic or a reader chooses to use, or to withhold. It has to do with power achieved, and perhaps with batting average—with how often the writer writes something that moves or changes the audience.

A writer who is preoccupied with greatness is by definition still a beginner. He is still a member of the audience, wanting to crawl up on stage, wanting applause, wanting, wanting, wanting . . .

He is still too conscious of the payoff, and not conscious enough of the performance. He is thinking about what HE wants, and not about what the audience wants. He is self-indulgent. He is lacking both humility and confidence. Therefore he will produce nothing great.

The young writer's mind is full of such excess baggage—a humiliating condition, brought to the fore usually by editorial criticism. For the greatest and least forgivable sin of the editors is that, usually, they turn out to be right.

Students come to me, now, as I once came to editors, bearing copy. They have their literary pretensions, their sweaty little egotistical desires, just as I had. They try to conceal the fact that they're not

really committed, that they're slumming. But in this they are totally transparent. The fact oozes from their pores, and from their copy.

What they want is for me to look beyond their copy, and to tell them of the greatness in their artistic souls.

That's not my job, of course; their artistic souls are *their* problem, not mine. My eternal job, as editor and coach, is to discuss with them the inadequacies of their skill as reflected in their copy. This is hard on both of us—and, to them, humiliating.

I remember so well, as I tell them all the things they least want to hear, things about commas and getting names right and the clarity of simple sentences.

And of all the things they don't want to hear, what they don't want to hear most of all is that art, whether journalistic or otherwise, takes time.

Why, at this rate they'll be old and wrinkled before they're really great!

Well, yes. But they will get old and wrinkled anyway, barring the even less acceptable alternative. The trick is to make an investment toward that day. And if you want to invest in yourself as a writer, the first thing you need to learn is patience.

Greatness in writing, like greatness in most else, arises from the acute consciousness of detail. Truth emerges not from art but strong verbs and well-placed commas. You can't change the world if you can't define the semicolon. Syntax matters. Grammar matters. Reporting matters.

Art submits to these things and grows out of them, not vice versa. So does the writer, who becomes a writer only by virtue of such submission.

The discipline that makes art what it is grows from the ability to observe both details and patterns of details. Seeing, for instance, is the core of the writer's art—and "seeing" has to do with consciousness. The writer who doesn't bother to notice how many "l's" there are in Philip Jones is a poor seer as well as a poor reporter. A good writer, in the end, must be an excellent reporter.

And it doesn't matter, in the end, whether the writing itself is classified as fiction or nonfiction.

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he won a Pulitzer for explanatory journalism. He is an author of the book, *Writing for Story.*

Feature editor Ken Doctor provides plenty of tips for getting training, but the one bit of advice that deserves to be repeated is that the onus for growth will be upon you. Writing and journalism courses, mentors and wonderful working conditions may or may not help, but only you will make the difference. Only you can map out your life. There will be plenty of obstacles, surely some detours, but ultimately success will be in your hands.

Ten Surefire Ways to Train Yourself for the Next Millennium!

Ken Doctor

If you are wondering where your first (or next) job is going to come from, and what training you'll need to get it, you're not alone.

Print journalism absorbed more changes in the 1980s than it did in any other decade of the century. Wall Street tightened its oversight of major newspaper and magazine companies, making clear the bottom line was the only line of type that counted. *USA Today* started out as a joke in most newsrooms and by the end of the decade had forever changed the way newspapers thought about design and information and the use of color, forcing such a gray eminence as the *New York Times* to invest almost a quarter-billion dollars in a state-of-the-art color plant.

Specialized magazines of unbelievable specificity flourished in the marketplace. Where once a single health magazine occupied the newsstands, now more than a dozen compete for readers. There have been more titles and lots more circulation—magazines have doubled their circulation in the past 40 years, while newspapers have struggled to maintain what they had as the first baby boomers were entering the world.

Those newspaper readers, who are just now being introduced to the possibilities of audiotex and videotex, have voted with their ink-stained hands, tossing back the daily newspaper to the doorstep of the local newspaper company. As 1990 dawned, fewer than one

of two Americans bought a daily newspaper. The journalism press has turned near apoplectic about the future of the industry and what could be done to save it.

Newspaper companies have responded by making the readership crisis the center of each and every conference. Take-it-or-leave-it journalism is out; give-'em-what-they-want-to-read is in. Sunday magazines are out; quick-read graphics are in. Reporters are out; clerks are in. At a recent meeting of New Directions in News, one top editor of a major newspaper group suggested that reporters could soon be replaced by community residents who just call in their "news" to computers, who (excuse me, which) could do the requisite sorting and dispatch it to readers.

It's an industry without a compass, one that can too easily leave a would-be features writer directionless. But, out of chaos comes opportunity. Yes, the 1990s will mean more information-gathering clerk jobs. Readers are hungry for more information about what's going on and about what to do. And newspapers are learning they don't need highly paid writers to do these "lists." Though they'll hire more clerks, newspapers in the 1990s will also have greater needs for people with what psychologists call higher-order cognitive skills—the writer's gift of explaining, analyzing and interpreting the vastly changing world to readers. As the two-tier system develops, prepare yourself for the top one.

Here, we'll skip the long, turgid story about problems of daily journalism and get right to the sidebar: how smart training can help you profit from the current depression.

1. I Meant to Get a Mentor

We think of ourselves as being the object of training. We dream of finding the ideal mentor, but fail to remember that we're in the driver's seat. Work hard to train *yourself* because the odds are long you won't find anyone else who can set and keep your own life and career on course.

You're a writer, right. Write it down. Today. Who are you? What are you best at? What do you want and need to learn? How can you do it?

What kind of training have you had; what kind do you need?

Make the list and update it at least once a year. Make it your birthday present. Need help with the list? See point 9 below.

2. Get Training: Formal Journalism Education

As you are allowed, pick and choose those classes that play to your strengths and weaknesses. Stress the skills classes: interviewing, writing, reporting, computer skills. Volunteer for role playing assignments. Talk to the professor out of class, seeking training and interning opportunity tips. Work on the campus newspaper. Immerse yourself.

If you're beyond journalism school, take the opportunity to refresh your mind with several good books on feature writing. A weekend spent with one of the following paperbacks may stimulate new thought:

Writing to Learn and *On Writing Well,* by William Zinsser;
Mastering the Message, by Lauren Kessler and Duncan McDonald;
Writing for Story, by Jon Franklin

Working journalists should also check out such in-service training opportunities as offered by the Poynter Institute for Media Studies in St. Petersburg, Florida, and the American Press Institute.

3. Get Training: The World Outside Journalism

Remember, journalism should only be an approach to the world, not a world unto itself. Get what you need out of journalism school and get into whatever other studies interest you. Don't think you have to stick to a straight liberal arts regimen. Consider film studies if you love movies, etymology if Greek and Latin roots could enrich your language, public health if you're interested in fitness writing, gerontology if you want to be ahead of one of the greatest demographic trends of the century, Middle Eastern cooking if you are hungry, Russian literature if you want to pull your writing away from newsese. Take a course in story telling, and apply these ancient techniques of oral history to what you do as a writer.

Don't forget your computer skills. The necessity of word-processing skills are self-evident, but don't forget on-line data research skills. In the coming age, when only the best and timeliest information will do, those who only use the *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature,* in book form, will be unemployed.

Pick up these classes at four-year schools, community colleges, community education classes, or cooking stores—employers of the

21st century won't be checking where you went to school, but what you know.

4. Put Yourself in Training: On the Streets

Stop by the best magazine stand in town; the best bookstore. See what the readers are reading. Read something beyond your own local newspaper.

Forget writing for awhile. Volunteer to work with southeast Asian refugees, help out in a literacy program for the homeless, do communications for a local political campaign. Do the traveling you've always wanted to do. See the world differently, and then see what you'd like to write and what you now know to write about.

5. The Age of Generalists Is Dead, Generally Speaking

Have #2 pencil, will travel, is no longer what hiring editors want to hear. Unless you want to work a 60-hour week covering everything from bake sales to sewer board hearings for the local weekly, you'll have to specialize. What are your passions? Write them down and figure out what kind of writing you can do about them that will sell to current or potential bosses.

6. Focus on the Work, Not the Money

If you can afford this luxury, buy it. You may be able to obtain salaried work, or you may have to take it article by article. Journalism, unlike surgery or space science, allows you to work on speculation.

Remember, future employers will not hire you—for an article or for life—off your résumé. Journalism is a business of clips: the proof is in the paper. Find the situations that will yield the best clips.

After you've assessed your own abilities, write down a list of publications you believe may realistically accept your work. Inventory dailies, weeklies, monthlies, in-house organs published by corporations and hospitals, business-oriented publications, alumni magazines. When you've got your list, you're ready to go to point 7.

7. Time Is Time

Whether you are going to test life as a freelancer or want to develop your versatility as a writer, try the shingling exercise. "Shingling" is

what Dick Neuberger, onetime-prolific freelancer and onetime U.S. Senator from Oregon, called his ability to spin the same subject into an endless variety of stories for different publications and different readers. Neuberger's facility was such that he even wrote articles in the Senate's cloak room, in odd moments between appointments.

For example, Neuberger covered the Depression-era opening of the Grand Coulee Dam, selling a primary piece to *Reader's Digest* and then following up with reports targeted to other readerships, recycling the same material, but adjusting the spin.

You should be able to shingle any story—assess the subject interest, find the people interest, the alumni magazine interest, the how-to interest, and the photo story interest. Build your writing house successfully without having to start fresh with each building material.

Shingling forces you to do what any good journalist should also do—develop a sixth sense of what the readers want to know. In a world rapidly devolving into niches and developing the technology to reach those niches, tailoring writing to specific groups becomes a basic of the trade. It also forces the recognition that there are an infinite variety of ways to tell any story.

8. Look Inside the Glass Cages

If you are looking for a job, look beyond the size of the building or the circulation of the publication. Work with people you can learn from. Pick editors who know more than you do and communicate with more than barks. Pick colleagues who want to be better jounalists than they are. Start a writers' group, if just in a tavern one night after work. Play the Outer Limits game: What could this story have been if it were to be written again. (It will be, some time, somewhere.) Learn from your mistakes, and your successes.

9. Double Your Fun

Pick assignments that will stretch you. As journalists, we have the unique ability to think up an idea and knock on anybody's door to ask questions. If you're interested in doing work overseas, find assignments that will allow you to interview those involved in foreign exchange work, international business, cross-cultural training. Get the training and education you want in the work you get paid

to do. Not sure you want to be a feature writer? Interview a career counselor and get tested for free.

10. More Rigor, Less Mortis

Follow your plan. It's easy to be seduced by the comfort of any work situation. But if it's not training you to become the writer you want to be, make plans to move on.

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End Words

Afterthoughts: More Points to Remember

1. Almost no one becomes an overnight success. In the beginning your work will have problems. You will need to write and write and write and study the craft of writing and read and read and read. Self-doubt will nibble at your heels with each step, but success might just come for those who continue to grow and refuse to give up.

2. In pursuit of success you will have to master the fundamentals. But don't let not knowing the rules prevent you from getting started. Write first and learn the rules as you write. As important as grammatically correct writing is, almost one hundred years of research have found there is no correlation between knowing all the grammar rules and writing well.

3. Many newsrooms today are more like writing mills than places to learn. If you decided to go to a newsroom, be careful that production does not rule over quality.

4. Eventually everyone in nonfiction writing will be forced to use word processing. In putting this book together, almost 80 percent of the contributors sent in their work on disks. All of the first-line editing was done on a personal computer. It's a must that journalists be fluent with some form of word processing.

5. Feature sections at newspapers will most assuredly change in the years ahead. In fact, they could even disappear, and the trend

seems to be more toward a continuing emphasis on shorter stories. That could translate into an even smaller outlet for truly fine feature writing, which will mean that only the best writers will succeed. Of course, it could just happen that editors will wise up and realize that readers are not rebelling as much against length as they are against poor writing. Ultimately, it is up to you to show them what good writing is all about.

Exercises

1. If a journey of a thousand miles (or the journey to greatness) begins with the first step, then make sure the first step in your journey is studying William Strunk and E.B. White's *The Elements of Style* (Macmillan, 1959). Master its contents and you will know most of the important rules of usage, grammar and style. With fewer than 80 pages, it is a classic that every writer should read often.

2. Write a self-appraisal of who you are and what you want from your writing life. Then write the course of action or training you will need to attain your goals. Look at it again in a year to see how you are doing, and the next steps you will take.

Further Reading

1. *Writing for Story* by Jon Franklin (Mentor Book, 1986). Two-time Pulitzer Prize winner Jon Franklin gives a systematic plan to writing feature stories. Stresses nonfiction novel approach to writing stories.

2. *On Writing Well* by William Zinsser (Harper & Row, 1985). Another must for any writer's library. It's a book that will guide the beginner and remind the professional how to keep his or her writing fundamentally sound.

How the Pros Do It

Writing Sample Number 7

Of all the examples in this book, this one is the hardest to take apart and examine. Earlier examples, like Mr. Lucky and the blind boy, were well

written, but rather easy to analyze. Mr. Lucky was really not so lucky and that was the theme of the story. In the blind boy story, the mother's relationship and her demand that his blindness would not stop him from living a normal life dominated the story.

In this story by Madeleine Blais, the relationship between mother and daughter and between Frank, who we rarely see, is much more subtle. In Chapter 2, Blais talks about the need to see and write about "grayness, nuance, something other than that sharp division that characterizes most news in which people have either won the lottery or they lost it bad."

This is a story about nuance. The lead is almost quiet to a fault, and some might see it as a fault. It doesn't exactly grab you by the collar and drag you into the story. Nonetheless, it sets the tone for the rest of the story. A beautiful story. In the story Hannah says, "A poem is as much what you don't say and what you imply as what you do say."

The same could be said about great prose writing. In the Mr. Lucky story the writer never once says Mr. Lucky is unlucky. It's implied. In this story, we never see a lot of Frank, but in the end his relationship with Vivian makes this story.

Blais spent weeks with Vivian and Hannah, but she centered the story around one day—the birthday. Often in feature writing, it takes time to find that right moment. If Blais had tried to write about all the time she spent with Hannah and Vivian it would not be much of a story. More often than not compressing the time makes unwieldy stories come together. It is much easier to see a beginning, a middle and an end. And in this story, the ending is brilliant.

The Poet and the Birthday Girl

By Madeleine Blais
From the *Miami Herald*'s *Tropic* magazine

Victoria Hospital, private room: That's where Vivian Kahn was born on April 16, 1943. She does not hesitate to remind people of this fine beginning, especially when her birthday is approaching. Every year there is a big celebration. One time Vivian Kahn went to a Tony Orlando concert: "He kissed me once.

"He kissed me twice. And he called me one of God's special children. Which I am."

Her mother Hannah:

"When you learn your child has Down's syndrome, one of the first thoughts is: How will I get through the first

Christmas? The first major holiday. And then you think, how will I get through the first Mother's Day? The first day of first grade, when all the other children are enrolling in regular classes.

And then you think, how will you tell her about the womanly processes?

"But you can. And you do."

"How was work today, Viv?"

"Fine."

"What did you do?"

"Well, we said our address and when our birthday is and our social security number."

Vivian's speech is exceptionally clear for a Down's victim, and her vocabulary reflects her mother's love of language. "Marty said that on my birthday he's going to play music. He said he had something cooking up his sleeve, and we're really going to town. Ronni said she's going to give me a present." It is dinnertime and Vivian looks up quickly from her plate, anticipating her mother's disapproval. "I told Ronni a card would be plenty." Vivian swallows hard and repeats herself, "Plenty, Hannah, plenty."

Hannah: "One thing with retarded kids. They're not jealous. They are noncompetitive, nonmanipulative. One gets something, they're all happy. Call it pure soul or pure light or whatever you want to call it."

Vivian Kahn goes to "work" every day at the Association for the Development of the Exceptional, on North Miami Avenue. She is small, 4 feet 7 inches tall, and dresses young for her age: Hannah says that size 14 Polly Flinders fit best. She joins 50 other retarded adults who are taught how to count, how to take a bus, how to answer the phone. Her mother drives Vivian in the morning, and she is given a ride home to their apartment in the afternoon. Her mother, who has had a job selling furniture at Whitecraft Industries' showroom for 41 years, arrives home a couple of hours after Vivian, at 5:30. A few minutes before her mother's blue car pulls into the parking lot, Vivian goes to the window and looks for her, so she can wave a greeting at the woman with silver hair. Hannah has a remarkably energetic stride for a woman of 72; it is the always-hurried movement common in mothers of young children. When she is alone, Vivian can take care of herself. She can watch

Notice all the information about the two women in this paragraph. Readers want information.

television or type a letter or answer the phone as long as "I don't give no information to wrong numbers. Frank taught me that. He taught me not to climb and not to touch the stove too."

Frank Kahn was Vivian's father and the stepfather, though he disliked the term, of Hannah's two sons from a previous marriage. Hannah Kahn was 19 when Melvin was born, 21 when Danny came. "No one could have been more scared with a baby than I was. I remember the doctor told me, as long as you've got a healthy baby, they'll probably turn out all right no matter what you do." Hannah Kahn's first marriage is a phase of her life about which she is uncommunicative, yet it has perhaps figured in some of her writing. For in addition to the steady prosaic life amid the rattan, selling the *étagères* and convertible couches, Hannah Kahn is a poet of some note, once considered a leading candidate for the title of poet laureate for the state of Florida. *Ex-Wife* is an early poem about which she says today: Too obvious, everything about it. The sentiments, the rhymes:

Always try to get as much written research material as possible. It often works into the story.

Wonder if my shadow / ever interferes, / do they know their laughter / as an echo of my tears.

Wonder if her love / is stronger than was mine? / I who only asked for bread— / She whose bread was wine.

Sometimes when the shadow / is intensified, / I can hear him breathing / softly at my side,

I can feel his fingers / reach across the night / and rest upon my eyelids / shutting out the light—

I have heard him tapping / on my window pane / and when I rose to answer / found out that it was rain.

Wonder when their beings / merge within a flame / does he ever call her / by my name?

The writer in the background watches, listens and later uses the material.

Dinner over, Vivian helps clear the dishes. She inquires after dessert. "When God gave you to my house, Vivian, there must have been a contract requiring dessert with every dinner." Dessert is an apple. After dinner, Vivian says, "I'm cold, I'm chilled."

"What should you do when you're chilled?"

"Put something on."

Vivian was Frank's first child. Hannah had wanted a girl, and when Vivian was born Frank told Hannah, "It's a girl. You got what you wanted." Hannah recently came

across the hospital bill: 10 days, $100.

Vivian has fetched her sweater. "Hannah," she says, very businesslike, "take your pills."

"See," says Hannah, reaching for her pills. "She watches over me."

She touches her daughter's soft pretty hair. "I was born with nervous hands," she once wrote. "What they loved they had to touch."

Nuances like this one make this story.

They found out that Vivan had Down's syndrome when she was 8 months old, just after Christmas: "We went to the doctor for a routine checkup. She was dressed in white shoes, a blue organdy dress. For the first time her hair was long enough for a narrow ribbon bow."

Remember Hannah is recalling an event 40 years ago. But she does so, so vividly it could have been yesterday. Writer has built a trust with subjects.

Frank and Hannah Kahn were left alone with Vivian in the examining room. The child's chart was on a table, open. The doctor had written, "Did you tell her that Vivian is a Mongoloid child?"

Hannah:

"In those days nothing was known about retardation. No one knew anything about an extra chromosome. Lightning strikes. I felt that I was the only person in Miami who had given birth to such a person. I can still remember the words of the doctor: "They Are Unfinished Children. During Pregnancy Because Of Some Endocrine Or Other Deficiency In The Mother That We Do Not Know, The Unborn Child Is Not Completed. She Can Never Go Beyond The Mental Age Of 5 Or 6 And It's Best For You And Your Other Children That She Be Placed In An Institution When She's 13 Months Old. There Is No Doubt About Our Diagnosis. See This, These Special Epicanthal Folds In The Eyes. (But her eyes are impish. . . .) Their Little Fingers, Short Curved Like A Fish. Their Hands Are Short And Stubby. (Her fingers which we had counted and re-counted. She's double-jointed. . . .) These Children Usually Are."

At home that night Hannah performed the usual tasks in a trance. She prepared the dinner, talked to the boys, cleared the table. Frank took Vivian into her room, changed her, gave her a bottle and put her to sleep. Hannah thought: I should have known. Should I have known? The pregnancy was so easy, too easy. I told the doctor the baby wasn't kicking as much as the others had. He said, "We'll take care of everything, Mrs. Kahn." At the hospital the

nurses remarked on what a good baby Vivian was, how well she slept.

Frank came into the living room, dressed for the card party they had planned on going to. Hannah Kahn was incredulous. "Get dressed," Frank said softly. "Everything goes on." Hannah remembers only one detail from the evening. "I drank cup after cup of coffee. It tasted like blood."

"Frank established the rhythm. Frank set the pace. Without him I don't know how I would have survived. . . .

"We never actually sat down and told the boys something was wrong with Vivian. We said she was slow in some ways but advanced in others, like her dancing. Both boys were always good with Vivian. I remember Melvin used to go to the beach with the debating team, and every now and then he'd ask me if Vivian could come along. I told him, Melvin, the other boys aren't going to want Vivian to come along and he said oh, they do. Vivian walks around and she attracts the girls and helps us make friends. Danny told me that whenever he took Viv to the playground, he never thought she was slow. He simply assumed all the other children were very advanced.

"In whatever way Danny and Melvin might have been hurt by it, they certainly got to be more considerate people through their association with Vivian. By far she has enriched me. Without Vivian I would've had such an ordinary, take-for-granted life."

"Child," the mother once wrote, "give me your hand that I may walk in the light of your faith in me."

Blais often uses Hannah's writing to emphasize emotional high points in the story. Blais writes sparsely about Frank, but his presence is always felt.

From a letter Hannah Kahn wrote to a friend shortly after her husband's death in 1975:

"Vivian's relationship with her father was unique; everyone who knew them grieved doubly when he died, wondering how Vivian would adjust. She's been wonderful. . . . He taught her well.

"I don't have to tell you how grief comes in waves. Vivian sometimes sets the table for three instead of two.

"About six months ago he re-wallpapered our kitchen. The icebox goes in a niche. . . . He already wasn't feeling well—moving the icebox was difficult. I told him no one would know if he didn't paper behind the icebox. He looked at me, smiled and said, 'I would know.'

"Tomorrow I have to go to the lawyer's office and sign a new will. . . . Vivian's future is my greatest concern."

From *Betrayal*:

> *I walk among the headstones in my sleep—*
> *I read the names, the dates. I place two stones*
> *Upon your grave. I ask you to forgive*
> *That in some strange, distorted way I live.*

From *Metastasis*:

> *The cells divide*
> *and multiply*
> *My body is their battleground*
> *I am the field they occupy.*

Hannah Kahn had a mastectomy seven years ago. During a recent visit to the doctor "something showed up on the scan." Hannah now rehearses the reality of the future: "Someday our life together, as it is now, will end. Vivian's not going to be by the window and I'm not going to get out of the car." She is looking into Haven School, the possibility of placing Vivian there five days a week to accustom her to separation. "It has always been my unspoken dream that something would happen to her before something happened to me so Vivian would be forever sheltered."

"Hannah," says her daughter, "now please don't forget your pills."

This pill quote, placed here, seals the reader's understanding of the bond between Hannah and Vivian.

Vivian Kahn has never been to her father's grave. She thinks he is buried in the clouds. On his birthday she always waves to him in the sky ("That's where Frank is, he's in heaven") and sings "Happy Birthday" including the second verse, *We love you, we do*. "Frank didn't want Vivian to see him sick in the hospital. Instead they spoke to each other over the phone. He never wanted Vivian to go to the cemetery. He didn't think she could handle the thought of the underground thing.

"At the time of Frank's death I was very worried about the effect it would have on Vivian. I didn't understand that for a child like Vivian who has two parents, when one dies, her life didn't change very much. She was in the same house, the same bed. There was no break," says Hannah, "in the rhythm."

When it came time to tell Vivian about the womanly processes, this is what Hannah Kahn did:

"Frank would die if he knew this. He was a very modest man. I never sat down and told her. I took her in the bathroom with me and showed her and tried to behave as naturally as possible because I have discovered with Vivian if you're casual, she's casual. With Vivian, I don't know how much she needs to know. At Vivian's job, at A.D.E., they keep stressing Who-man Growth and Development, as Vivian pronounces it. I don't know what they're telling her. I don't know what she understands. I'll never forget the day Vivian was watching 'All In The Family,' and Vivian is yelling 'push, push' and I ran into the living room to see what was happening and Gloria was having a baby and my daughter's coaching her.

"At A.D.E. they say, this is reality. This is actuality. The children should know about these things. I look at Viv, and I see a child, in many ways, a child of 8 or 9, and I keep thinking: Who would want their 8- or 9-year-old child thinking about getting married?"

Only once did Vivian ever cross Hannah. That was when Richard gave Vivian an engagement ring, a diamond. Hannah told Vivian to return it. Vivian put it in her pocketbook.

Vivian often chooses to wear the clothing that Richard has told her turns him on. "What does that mean, Viv? Turning someone on?" "Actshully, Hannah, it means I light up his life."

Vivian has a notion her mother would like her to cool it with Richard: "I think she's wants me to be just friends."

Would she like to be more than friends?

"Be honest now. I would love to, but I don't know if my mother's going to let me."

Why Richard?

"Because he thinks I'm beautiful and so on and so on."

What's sex?

"I would suggest sex is good, you know why? I'm not embarrassed in saying it. Now making love is when you're kissing on the lips. My mother won't let me kiss on the lips. Sex means when you get VD."

Babies?

"I do have my dolls, Princess from Hungary and Granny from Russia. They are not real babies, they're dolls. But the only thing is how is my mother going to put up with it,

it's a big job, supposing he starts doing something in his diapers."

Where do babies come from?

"Babies," she says, "can come from anywhere. The mother's stomach, a hospital, could come from God."

Vivian Kahn begins the celebration of her birthday on January 1st, with references to surprises and cake. On the first day of April she announces, "It's my month." This year was the first year in a long time that Hannah Kahn allowed Vivian to be her true age: 40. For years Vivian's age was frozen at 16. Hannah: "It was easier that way."

The festivities lasted two days. On Friday, April 15 Vivian received flowers at A.D.E. and everybody gave Vivian a kiss. There was a wondrous cake from a Cuban bakery. Vivian got to sit in the middle of the cafeteria next to a person of her choosing. She chose Richard. As the birthday girl, she was given the first piece of cake, but she made certain that Richard received the next piece. "Here Richard, this is the second piece." Marty, a man in his 50s who has spent his life in institutions and who has a gift for playing the piano without being able to read music, told Vivian "You ain't seen nothing yet." Then he sat down at the piano and played Vivian's favorite song, "You Light Up My Life." She got up and sang, So many nights I sit by the window waiting for someone to sing me a song. Vivian has told her counselor at A.D.E. she would like to be Debby Boone, or a secretary. Ronni gave Vivian more than a card, she gave her a bracelet and kept saying, "Happy Birthday. Many more 'til next year." Vivian clapped her hands and touched her bracelet: "I've never had it so good. The cake and this and the flowers." Marty was asked by popular acclaim to play "those Marine songs" which he did, and at the end of the hour, he got up, received a smattering of applause, and looking at his scruffy shoes when he spoke, which is his custom, he said, "I told you, you ain't seen nothing yet." On the next day Hannah and Vivian attended the annual luncheon of Women in Communications at the Omni, and Vivian stood before the hundreds of women in attendance to receive some birthday applause. A private party followed, at the Kahn's residence.

Hannah Kahn's *Eve's Daughter* was published in 1962. Her latest collection, *Time, Wait* will be published soon by

the University Presses of Florida. By far *Ride a Wild Horse* is her most successful poem. Published first under the title *Into the Sun* in *The Saturday Review*, it has been in more than 20 textbooks and anthologies:

Ride a wild horse
with purple wings
striped yellow and black
except his head
Which must be red.

Ride a wild horse
against the sky—
hold tight to his wings
Before you die
whatever else you leave undone—
once ride a wild horse
into the sun.

Vivian has written two poems:

The Pink Carnation
The Pink Carnation is wearing a white sports coat
all dressed up for a date.

The Ocean View
I looked across the Atlantic ocean
I see Europe
the ocean waves are dancing just like diamonds.

When Hannah Kahn is asked the difference between prose and poetry, she answers with a quote from one of her poems:

I wanted to write about the old men
Who look at the dinner menu for a long time,
And then ordered doughnuts and coffee.

"I wanted to say, as quickly as I could, these men were poor and could not afford to order what they wanted. A prose writer might have said the same thing, but in a more complete way. A poem is as much what you don't say and what you imply as what you do say. A poem gives the reader the chance to add to or complete the thought.

"A poem can be about anything. It contains a certain moment you can almost take a picture of. It should capture a feeling or an essence or a scene. Something that stands out, that is not blurred into the momentum."

A certain moment:

After the guests had departed, Hannah and Vivian Kahn sat down to a light supper of gefilte fish and salad and chocolate mousse cake. ("I like my life," says Hannah, "but sometimes I don't like the facts of my life.") After dinner Vivian sat by the phone to collect more calls. More than once, she admired the flowers from her nieces and nephew. Vivian examined her gifts: The doll from Mexico, the Lollipop bloomers from Aunt Sylvia, the handkerchiefs. She wanted to play her new record, *Elvira,* sung by the Oak Ridge Boys, but she decided she better wait by the phone. Whenever it rang, and it rang a lot, it was for her: Danny and Phyllis in Spokane, Leslie in Washington, D.C., Estelle's son in California. Vivian decided that on the next day she would like to wear one of her new dresses. She thought it would be nice if her mother took her for a ride past Victoria Hospital.

Notice the use of the "certain moment" above and then here. You can almost take a picture of it.

At 8 o'clock Hannah said, "Viv, I think it's time. I think this is the time you were born."

"Oh, you think so Hannah?"

"Think so? I know it. It's 8:20, Viv."

Vivian rocked back and forth on the sofa. Her chin was buried in her neck, concealing the wide happy smile. The short stubby fingers clapped in delight. "Victoria Hospital. Private room."

Great writing is not a 9 to 5 job. If Blais hadn't been there at 8 PM, there would be no great story.

"That's right. Nothing but the best for my daughter."

"Hannah, do you think we could go out on the terrace and say hello to Frank?"

The older woman stood, and crossed the room, her stride erect and swift, as usual. She opened the sliding glass door and made a sweeping motion with her hand, ushering her daughter onto the balcony. "That's because I am the birthday girl, right," said Vivian. The two women stood side by side. They held each other's hands. They looked up. The night was cloudy and still. Vivian took her hand and raised high the short bent fingers. She waved at the sky. In a soft shy voice she said, "Frank, it's my birthday today. Right now I will be born, be born, sure, Frank. Thank you for carrying me home from the hospital." Then her hand still raised, her face uplifted, Vivian stood utterly still and listened as only she can listen. "He says he remembers me," she said, her head beginning to rock. "He's singing 'Happy Birthday.' "

Ending ties into the beginning.