

Vanish Away Like Smoke

Mr. Kohlbert locked his hands behind his back and paced in front of the class. "Und sooooooooo . . ." he droned, "Ve haf efry reason to belief dat Columbus vas a Jew."

I paused in the sketch I was drawing of a new 1957 Ford Thunderbird and glanced around the musty classroom. The other students, like me, were all within months, one side or the other, of their twelfth birthdays. Their eyes spoke an interest I could not believe was real. After all, it was Sunday, 11 a.m., and like me they must have wanted to be somewhere else, anywhere but here. I put the rubbery-tasting eraser end of my pencil in my mouth and gazed around at the girls' chests to see if any needed a larger bra than the last time I'd looked, a half-hour before.

I never much minded that week after week I sat sweating in this overheated room listening to what seemed myths, wishes, legends, and lies related as truth. I minded only that their truth seemed so damned important to Mr. Kohlbert, the bald teacher with the grating voice. The World War had ended the year I was born, and I had been told to accept on faith that a German Jew like Kohlbert had suffered in a way I was assured I could never understand, assured by my father, to whom the lies seemed equally crucial, who had lamented often that he too had suffered, been denied that job, a home in that neighborhood, membership in that club, just because his name was Solomon.

Another suffering member of our victimized, martyr race.

"Aha, you see?" my father, I knew, would say with a slight but continuous nod if I chose later to relate this news about Columbus. "Aha, you see?"

I did not see. I had been refused nothing. Being born a Jew had cost me nothing, I valued it at nothing, and I would rather have spent my Sunday mornings playing stickball at Mt. Vernon Junior High.

Only Michael Hirsch and Laurie Beckerman were not looking at Mr. Kohlbert. They looked at each other and at me. Laurie tapped her purse twice. She lifted her index and middle fingers in a V toward her mouth, puckered her full lips and winked. She'd brought them, the three Parliament cigarettes she'd snuck from her mother's pack as she did each Sunday. I winked back and began drawing on the inside back cover of my Jewish history book what I thought Laurie might look like standing on a tree limb with no clothes on, smiling, sweetly naked and dewy, honey-blond strands caressing her face. A few days before, I'd tried to draw Laurie nude in my science notebook during fifth period, and when Carol Buchwald, who sat beside me and told me we were going steady, saw the sketch I said it was what I thought she'd look like with short hair. She giggled and said, "It would look more like me if you'd make the boobs bigger." Carol took a deep breath, making her left nipple strain against her cashmere.

"I see your point," I said and doubled the size of Laurie's breasts, which made Carol say, "I love you, Andy."

Mr. Kohlbert cleared his throat loudly. He was glaring at me, determined to give my pride in Columbus's religion a jump start. He came to my seat and walked around it. He looked down at me, the fluorescent light glaring off his scalp. "Boys und girls, ven you get back from your break, ve vil discuss de responsibilities ve take on for being God's chosen people," he said and pushed us toward the door with a backhand wave.

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"So how 'bout that," said Laurie. She inhaled deeply. She'd been smoking for months now and liked to show off how easy it was, even that week she'd brought her father's Lucky Strikes, to speak with a chest full of smoke. "Columbus was a Jew. 'Stop the boat, boys! It's Friday night, and I can't travel for the next twenty-four hours.'"

"Go believe that crap," I said. I took a small puff on Laurie's mother's Parliament, kept it in my mouth, let it seep out, and tried to draw the smoke into my nostrils. It almost made me sneeze, but I fought the sneeze off before Laurie or Michael could see. I rolled my short sleeves up another inch and leaned casually back against the smudged wall of the boiler room in the synagogue's basement, the basement itself always deserted, a safe grotto in which to sneak our cigarettes.

"You know what that means, Laurie?" said Michael. He stood up straight. I hated when Michael stood up straight. He was four inches taller than I and was even talking about buying a razor. He stuck his face right up to Laurie's, inches from the sweet lips I'd licked Bonomo's Turkish Taffy off of in three separate dreams. "The guy who discovered this country was circumcised? Got a clue what *that* means?"

"Of course, stupid."

"Like hell you do."

"I'll draw it for you, smart ass."

"I'll *show* it to you, cute ass."

All three of us laughed together, then suddenly, together, grew still with fear. Footsteps. The sound was unmistakable, the squeak and scrape on the cement floor, loud against the basement's silence. Too petrified to drop our cigarettes, we let our widened eyes stare at the door. Could someone from the class have stumbled upon this room it had taken even us so long to discover? Would it be Harvey Bloom, the crew-cut brown-noser who told Mr. Kohlbert anything that might ingratiate? Would it be, no it couldn't be, even Kohlbert himself?

"What do I smell here?" It seemed like a full second pause between each bellowed word. A voice that sounded less like it came from a doorway than from a burning bush. Not quite God's, the voice belonged to the man who was as close to God as we could get.

"What's this? What do I smell?" He stood in full view now. His pressed lips made his beard jut out. One eyebrow lifted an inch higher than the other. He raised his arms, and the front of his red robe parted.

"Nothing," said Michael in a voice quivering like Jell-o you'd just tapped with a spoon. "Nothing, Rabbi Weisman."

"Nothing?" he thundered. "It's nothing I smell here, Laurie?"

Laurie looked at her cranberry penny loafers.

Rabbi Weisman glanced down toward her loafers, then back up, scowling at her as if she were a television he'd hit but could not get to stop scrolling. He turned to me, his last hope for confession. He folded his arms, tapping his left hand against his thin right bicep, rocking back and forth in his squeaky brown wing-tips. "*Nu*, Andrew? You also think I smell nothing?"

It would not be lying to a man, I thought. It would be lying to God. Kohlbert was one thing, easily dismissed. But the rabbi was no ordinary man. Like Abraham, like Moses, he and God kept in touch, they were friends, God was in this room with him, both waiting for my answer.

"Cigarettes, rabbi."

"Cigarettes!" He flung his arms open. "*Gott in Himmel!* Cigarettes!" He flung them back across his chest and gasped as if we had given him a bodily wound.

"Cigarettes, rabbi."

"Your parents know you smoke cigarettes?"

Three heads shook.

"They would approve?"

Three heads shook.

"This time you are very very lucky. This time I will not tell your parents, but . . ." His voice rose and, I knew, was about to chisel something in stone, "You will never, *never* do this again. Never again!"

"Never, rabbi." "They'd kill me, rabbi." "Thank you, rabbi. We're sorry." Our voices mingled in lingering fear and relief, and the rabbi left.

Kohlbert would have told them, I was certain. He'd have called them before class even resumed. But ours is a merciful God, and He has asked the rabbi to spare us this time. I told the

truth and He rewarded me. I will thank Him, maybe even ask my parents if I can go to services with them this Friday night. I can miss *Life of Riley* this once.

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It was Monday, the following night. I stretched out and lay back against the sofa. My right foot rested high on my left thigh, and I opened and closed my new Flap Jacks from Thom McAn. Carol had said they were boss. I was thinking about putting taps on them but doubted I was tough-looking enough to justify the image. Maybe I could get away with it if I were Italian.

I had finished all my pot roast and even the carrots and was eating an ice cream sandwich. I licked the edges slowly, trying to get all the ice cream out and be left with only the delicious chocolate sides. On the t.v. screen George was holding a cigar and explaining Gracie's actions to the camera, and I was laughing as hard as at their previous week's muddle. Outside the window the season's final snowstorm began easing up. I grew worried. Even on a snowy day, my father's trucks should all be in and he should be home. It was only a half-hour before bedtime and I wanted to tell him about the A-minus I'd gotten that morning on my social studies term project.

The doorknob grunted warmly and the apartment door swung open. My father stomped the snow from his shoes and entered. He placed his fedora crown-down on a magazine to catch the melting snow.

I waved high and wide, my arm a metronome. "Hi, Dad. I got great news for you."

My mother kissed his cheek. He patted her arm absently and walked past her, directly to the television, which he turned off.

"Andy, the rabbi called me at work."

My heart did something gymnastic. "He called you?"

"Of course he called me. Smoking! You think he shouldn't have called me?"

"But he said he wouldn't."

"Are you questioning the rabbi?"

"But he gave his word. He promised. He's the rabbi. He's supposed to be holy."

"It's *you* who's in trouble here, you schmuck, not the rabbi."

I stared at a painting across the room, a portrait of my mother in a rose-colored blouse, but my eyes saw only the rabbi standing in the sanctuary, leading us in prayer, holding against his ribs the scrolls descending to him from Moses himself, cradling them so lovingly you'd think Rabbi Weisman had hand-copied them. He told. He lied. He wears robes and interprets the Torah and has a grey beard and reads Hebrew faster than I can read English. He promised and it was a lie.

"You will go to bed this instant. . . ."

"But *Wyatt Earp*'s coming on."

"This instant."

"I got my social studies . . ."

"This instant! Tomorrow we will discuss your punishment. But this you can believe: you're in big trouble."

I shuffled to my room. Even through the Flap Jacks I felt the coldness of my hardwood floor. I tugged my clothes off and threw them in the corner. One sock landed against the white baseball Jim Gilliam had fouled off the year before. An usher had been dusting a seat to my right, high in the first base upper deck at Ebbets Field, when Gilliam sent the ball soaring toward me. My father leaped up and snared it with the ease of an angel catching a star. He had tussled my hair through my Dodger cap and slipped the ball into my windbreaker pocket. That ball was my favorite possession.

I pulled the bleachy-smelling sheet up to my nose in the darkness and could feel my breath trapped against it, coming in irregular stutters. My skin felt bristling and prickly. My parents seemed to be debating in the living room, but the words were muffled by a pounding in my ears. I lay a long time watching the shadows drift across the ceiling, cloudy ink-blot forms growing steadily more ominous. My father's punishments were never pleasant, but they always seemed fair, even to me. It would not be so bad that I was in trouble. But I was not the one I feared for. I lay awake a long time, hearing the flattened voices, feeling my own moist breath, staring into a deepening darkness that began to invade me, under the growing horror that the one who was in trouble was God.

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About the Author

Interview

Andy Solomon, Author of "Vanish Away Like Smoke"

What pleases you most about the way your essay turned out? Are there any ways in which it fell short of your original goals?

I'm generally pleased with how the essay turned out, as I wanted mostly to capture the magnitude of the betrayal I felt at 12 when this "holy" man whom even my parents revered found nothing sacred in keeping his word. It was in no

sense a personal betrayal, because I scarcely knew him on a personal level; rather, it was impersonal and sinister because he was, to my pre-adolescent mind, our family's intermediary with God. I think I caught that. Still, just as a pianist can't play the notes in the cracks, there are subtleties of feeling that I'm not sure I managed to capture. I'm not sure you can ever quite achieve the vision you start with in your mind, just come as close as possible.

How did your essay develop, both in your initial thinking about it and in the revision process? What happened in writing that you didn't expect would happen?

All my adult life, I've been a journal keeper, and among the journals I keep is a Progoff Intensive Journal. Almost 20 years ago, as I was noting in that journal the most significant events of my life, I wrote down, "Being betrayed by the rabbi." That's all there was for many years, as I never did think to write a full account of it. Then a poet friend of mine was giving a writing exercise to my students that took the form, essentially, of, "Write about a time when you lost faith in someone or something." The rabbi's broken promise came immediately to mind. I did the exercise along with the students, and the essay just poured out in draft form in barely an hour. I shaped it into a short story, then recast it into its final form as an essay, which, since it really did happen just this way, is how I'm most comfortable with it. Perhaps the only thing that happened during the writing that came unexpectedly was recalling how hormonal you become suddenly when puberty hits.

If you write in other genres (poetry, fiction, playwriting, literary criticism, etc.) how does your experience writing in creative nonfiction depend upon or depart from your other kinds of writing?

I don't think there is, structurally, a great difference between the personal essay, the story and the poem, in that each form demands you get in and out quickly, implying a full background rather than actually creating one (that's where these forms differ from the novel). You try to capture the essence of your subject quickly and clearly. There is, though, enormous difference between all these forms, including the novel, and those forms which are primarily critical or scholarly. Critical writing is analytical, offering a clear view of a mind at work. Creative writing comes mostly from deeper than cognitive levels and is less about the mind than the total person, and thinking too hard during the actual writing can impede rather than facilitate the process. The analytical thinking comes before and especially after the draft is written. I have a jazz saxophonist friend who insists, "The less I think, the better I play." I think most artists understand what he means, but, unlike him, writers get the chance to revise.

Speculate about creative nonfiction as an emerging genre in American literature. Where do you see it going in the next several years, or even farther down the line?

Creative nonfiction has always been around, even before we used the term. Even as Wordsworth was composing his poems, his sister Dorothy was writing journal entries that beautifully describe his writing process and their life in the Lake District, and some of her entries are better than most of his poems. But since the 1930s with Hemingway's African and bullfighting nonfiction, and especially since the New Journalism of the 1950s and 1960s, we've come to celebrate creative nonfiction as a legitimate art form of equal standing with poetry and fiction. The form has enormous possibilities, as we will never tire of a perceptive mind, keen eye and articulate voice relating real life experience. Who could tire of the reflections of, say, Annie Dillard or Peter Matthiessen? However, while I love well-done memoir, I wonder if there may be too much being written now, reflecting a self-centeredness in our times and a corresponding alienation and isolation from one another.

What are the specific literary techniques you attempt to use as a creative nonfiction writer? For example, do you attempt to write in scenes? Do you employ dialogue? Specificity of detail? How and why?

Scene and dialogue in creative nonfiction are as central as they are in fiction. They are the means by which you show experience rather than simply tell it. I don't believe I think of them much as I write, as they just happen. What I do make a conscious effort to do, though-and this reflects a piece of advice I heard from George Garrett, who's taught so many fine writers-is make sure I continually include details that engage each of the five senses. That does not come naturally to me, so I make an effort, because the more the setting feels real and alive, the more credible will be the action that takes place there.

What advice might you offer young people interested in writing?

I'd offer aspiring young writers two different kinds of advice. First, concerning the craft of writing: Read all the good writing you can get your hands on, savor it, read it aloud, even copy your favorite passages longhand (you'll be surprised what you see about craft at that speed), and then keep writing frequently, daily, if possible. Second, and more important: Get in the habit of saying "yes" to opportunities for new experience, pay attention to the world around you, listen to people-both their words and the feeling behind the words, soak up experience like a sponge; when you pass a tree really see it. Then, even if it turns out your work doesn't get published, you'll have a life.

