

Michael Rawdon

The Dark Backward: Yokohama

You're told time and again when you're young to write about what you know, and what do you know better than your own secrets? . . . A little autobiography and a lot of imagination are best.

Raymond Carver

Here is one way to tell a good story.

Tediously, past endless tight-meshed shacks, the pedicab wound through alleys and half-streets. Twice it cut across a bazaar bustling, it seemed, with people preparing for the next day's skirmishes. Several times the bright, vertical machines of a *pachinko* parlour slashed the night. The pedicab threaded unhurriedly through the mazes of light. Caterwauls of reed-pipes pierced the autumn air.

Sitting tensely on the edge of the cramped seat, the boy squinted into the flowing shapes about him. Hardly aware, he was being overcome by apprehension. Every few minutes, as if prompted by the fear that he might suddenly find himself alone, he glanced at the woman beside him, obscure in black kimono. She leaned forward, hissing, towards the old man straining against the pedals. The man was crouching forward, his spread arms holding his body away from the handlebars, the saddle losing itself and then reappearing in the folds of his smock with each jagged push. One of the pedals clinked repetitively against the cycle's frame on its loose upwards swing. Without turning his head, the man threw back a curt *hai!* It was the single word of Japanese the boy understood. Yes.

He hadn't a choice. Jumping from the cab would be even more stupid. How would he find the harbour? He was up a shit-creek now. And no paddle. Directions had become tangled, forgotten in the increasingly distorted web of the strange city. He was forced to trust the woman. He had to keep going on. Shoals of kimono plashing

among the laden benches of a fish market surprised his gaze. An acrid stench filled the air. Plump, spent cuttlefish dusted with blue, like pale lichens, swam beneath reefs of opal lanterns while long, fluttering signs sprinkled their ideographs groundwards.

That boy is me. I try to imagine his uncertainty and apprehension, but it is difficult. He can not suppose what is about to happen, the decision, unconsidered and unreflective, but utterly compulsive, that he is about to make. Nor can he guess the immense problems he will eventually confront in writing about the experience that he is creating for himself. I imagine him now, stiff with anxiety and yet flooded by a kind of joy, and I try to recall the reasons that have led him to go with the old woman, his state of mind, the qualities of his perception, how he, even at this moment, is trying to remember what he is experiencing. I am amazed at his ignorance and his blind egotism, but I am also touched by his romantic faith that experience can be sought, even solicited, then had, remembered and written about. He is narrow, a fool no doubt, but far from being perverse. He writes in a certain, known manner and out of an easily recognizable motivation for writing.

In what I have written in my first two paragraphs I try to imagine his experience, his perception and the casting of his future memory (which is also mine, but, somehow, not altogether mine) and I have tried to write as he might have written then. I have tried to capture the words, the cadences, the shape itself of sentences as he might have written them a few days later, a month or so perhaps, in the fo'c'sle or in a cheap hotel in San Francisco or Sydney. The romantic faith in experience leads one to purpleness, to overwriting in rendering even quite ordinary things such as dead fish. How does a dead fish look? Like lumps of congealed slime? or like slack cords of frozen snot? But to call those plump cuttlefish "spent" is clearly to overwrite. They *must* be spent since they are, so clearly, dead. The fault is not in his experience but in his manner. He seeks the correct word, a language that is accurate and precisely given, for his brilliant, but dark, experience, and he gets it wrong. Too much romanticism, I find it easy to say now, but it is also a bad case of having read too little for the task. He has read Conrad, London, Maryatt, Sabatini, some others no doubt, but nothing of his own time and place, the early 1960's. He has not learned sparseness.

Yokohama had shimmered with the poised expectancy of an unstruck gong. An hour before, he had whistled down the ship's gangway, hands thrust securely into pockets, the quickness in his body leaping forward. It was his first night ashore since they had sailed from

San Francisco and, bearing purposefully beneath the Golden Gate Bridge, dropped everything familiar off the port quarter. He had been eager for something right to brag about, heady with the joy of things to happen that might appeal to his youth. As he had hurried from the ship, fingering a smudged, scribbled pass from the mate on deck, the evening had begun to close upon the bay. Gliding in the distance, or nestled among piers, the riding-lights of other ships had glinted on. The twin red glimmers from the lips of the breakwaters that shelter the inner port of from the outer roads had marked the verge of night. Seamen, hungered or satiated by the flickering images of the city, went and returned.

The hubbub, a counterpointed din of winch, falls, boom and chains clanking or creaking against the intermittent rumble of a ship's horn, had rung almost unnoticed about his ears. Before reaching the gangway he had stopped by the inshore railing just aft of the bridge, put one foot rakishly on the head of a bitt, dug swiftly into his hair with a comb, and turned to look back upon the scramble of gear. The midship hatches, gulping at the hoisting slings of cargo, were smothered up to the coamings. Beyond the ship, felt rather than observed, so powerful was its habitude upon him, the vastness of Tokyo Bay surged and, farthest, the spindling skeletons of the shipyard cranes arched out of the industrial areas, nearly swallowed in the dusk, of Chiba. A last obscene jest from the AB of the watch chasing him down the gangway, he had scudded through the pier's warehouse to the streets. Do or die, the AB had yelled. Pass in hand, he had gone out into the city. It was, the United States (which wasn't really foreign) excepted, his first exposure to human difference. The richness of the instant drove through him. His bones had sung.

I find it easier to imagine his eagerness and joy leaving the port than to describe his fear and apprehension later. (He would have said to himself, and then confidently written, that his bones "had sung.") His feeling that he is about to have a rich, unique experience is touching, but his romantic conviction that "rich" and "unique" belong only to exotic experience is embarrassing. He would not, at this time in his life (he is, perhaps, nineteen), think that he might write about growing up in Hamilton, about the port there, about seamen other than himself, about the ordinariness, the acts of ordinary people, of human life in a large industrial city and port. He is certainly proud of his seafaring experience, proud that he has sought it, and perhaps one can forgive him for that. It is not so easy to forgive the false future-yearning that drives his deliberate efforts to remember, to achieve feats of memory, and, later, his intense wilfulness about writing. Those exotic moments

in foreign countries etched in memory, he wills fiction into being. It is possible to observe the writers whom he had admired inscribed both in the way he wrote and in the way he shaped his experience even as he was having it. The attention to detail characterizes his idea of memory and of writing, but one can note that it is always exotic detail or, at least, the kind of remembered fact that might surprise, even startle or bemuse, readers who have stayed at home. The running-lights of ships and the red lights at the lips of the breakwater are precisely noted and he remembers the cranes of the shipyards in Chiba across Tokyo Bay. Could he actually have seen Chiba? At this remove, I can't know for certain. It may be that he could see lights and that someone told him that they were the shipyards of Chiba. In either case it is an important detail, and precisely the kind that he wants to remember and to use. He remembers the sounds of a ship's deck with impressive accuracy ("winch, fall, boom and chains clanking or creaking") but it is the kind of detail that he has learned from the fiction that he has read. Behind the shipboard detail that he remembers are the details that Conrad chose to evoke in his writing: Remember the paragraph in *The Nigger of The Narcissus* which describes the many types of nails, all jumbled together after the storm. His idea of writing fiction is inauthentic. He has read too little but what he has read counts for too much. He misses, obliviously, stories at least as good as the one he wants to tell.

His muscles and nerves tired as the jostling of the pedicab broke the rigidity of his body. He was growing impatient, worried. He felt cold fingers jab, twisting, in his gut. The woman, her English scant, fixed to a few precise situations, could not understand his questions. How much longer? Were they nearly there? She threw him off. O.K., Joe. O.K. With annoyance, some desperation, he began again, deliberately. Fresh to the barriers of language, slowness of speech seemed important.

Mamma-san, how much longer? he asked, word by word. He had to get back to his ship. There would be shit flying if he wasn't on deck by four to help clear the after-hatches. The mate had laid that on him when he signed the pass. Did Mamma-san savee the ship? O.K. Joe, little ways. Her tongue slid the syllables wetly through her teeth. O.K. He sat back, quiet.

The streets narrowed and fish-netted. The cab jolted roughly up into the hills west of the port. Once girls jammed a window under a glaring greenish neon, laughing and watching. Whores, he thought to himself. He studied the woman but she was looking away towards the hulk of a gutted building. Silently, he damned her. The variousness of the city had ceased to interest him. It seemed to have blended totally into a

single antagonist. Numbly, he dreaded its on-rushing, unpredictable bulk. Each fragment of flowing life, held and lost within the uneasy quicksilver of night, pounded against his blunted senses. Explicitness in things withdrew. The boy's mind could grip upon only the stifling regret that he had followed the woman.

She had stood out from the swarm of pimps and whores that fluttered around the cabarets in the first approaches to the harbour. Perhaps it had been the kimono. The other women, in skirts and sweaters in order to appear more familiar to the sailors leaving the ships, had seemed dangerously counterfeit. So he had chosen to go with the old woman in a black kimono. It was a dumb thing to have done. If he had chosen one of the westernized girls in sweaters, she would have had a pad there at the port.

After he had passed through the warehouse at the end of the pier and walked out onto the streets, he had crossed the financial and office district fronting the docks until he reached the Tsurumi. Small and fetid, crosshatched by barges and outlandish sampans, the boy had not known whether it was a river, canal or sewer. On the far bank, the bazaars had stretched, like a puzzle in lights, incitingly before him. Garish neons had spieled, in Latin letters, the delights of miniscule cabarets and honkytonks. Leeches to every doorway, girls had gesticulated encouragingly. He had felt his breath catch, felt himself prickle. Small, pretty girls, mouthing softly, caressingly, had set upon him. And men in doublebreasted blue suits had waved photos of their merchandise, crying its wonders. Smiling, muttering polite negations, turning his head aside, he had kept going. The foretellings of desire had worked strongly, but the evening had been too young, everything too strange, he too unsure.

Pressing through the shifting crowd along the sidewalk, he had confronted the old woman. She had scurried, uttering moist, low spittle-sounds, from the entrance to a souvenir shop, its windows cramped by bric-a-brac. In an attempt to block his path she had crossed, with clipped, hobbling gait, scissor-wise, in front of him. The shop window had bulged with figurines and chess sets: whaletooth samuai wheeled above kowtowing pawns. As he had ducked towards it, trying in a single long stride to edge around her, his glance flashed upon a large, polished Buddha sprawling in frozen uproar. Monkeys! They were tearing at the figure. The woman had swung back closer to the shop hastily, cutting him off. He had raised his eyes to confront hers.

Shrivelled, her hair drawn tightly over her head, she had sweated urgency. Sensing this, the boy could not have sensed the bleak necessity, the want, that shaped her manner. But he had hesitated, snared in

her need. Clutching, she had taken his arm, a bird snapping, and spoken rapidly, in English, to hold him. Did Joe like girl? Nice girl. An embarrassed, Maybe, has risen funnily in his throat. Not in business. Nice girl. Cherry girl. Joe like? Cherry girl.

His desires had quickened, but sceptically. Not cherry, not here, but she might be clean. There were some weird diseases a guy could catch, some even doctors hadn't heard about. Hadn't the second cook swollen up like rotten cheese on the last swing? So he had heard. He had felt his spine turn queasy when his fellow seamen had told him about the Hong Kong clap. He had felt an acute terror, which he continued to feel even as the woman excited him with the bait of a virgin whore, that his cock might puff up like a goddamn pumpkin and, like the second cook, he could have to have it reamed out. Long before they had reached Japan, he had learned, in stories, what he must expect.

Stung, intimidated, feeling vaguely committed to the woman because he had given her the chance to speak, he had doubtfully watched her call to the waiting pedicab. Led by the sleeve, he had climbed up, assuming a forged jauntiness, an air of worldliness that he had wished he felt. Until the cab had begun to move, the woman had prattled encouragement, then she had fallen quiet. And then the city had drummed against him. Only the brusque, strained happenings in the city around him penetrated his consciousness. A child hunched in a doorway, still wearing the day's school uniform, shrilled frenetically upon a *shaku hachi*. A one-legged man, lurching along at an angle that barely failed intersecting with that of the pedicab, looked up from under his skullcap, the scored tallow of his face wrenched into a yell, and belligerently swung a crutch. Jagged fragments of experience wheeled. The pedicab stopped.

I cannot entirely dislike this early incarnation of myself. His voice is inauthentic, laden with alien cadences, posturing in Conradian gestures. (I read him now and those unmistakable echoes of Conrad's normal precision in the use of the past perfect tense grate like a schoolmaster's chalk along a blackboard.) And, yes, he is sick-making in his borrowed desire to startle, to achieve those feats of memory and make a chiselled record of his experience, to mark himself off. Yet he is serious, dedicated, determined to become a writer. He is too serious about himself, of course, but that is only a passing disease. For him, the self must be fashioned in heroic proportions, neither distance nor irony can play a role. (In something that he writes about this time, the following sentence appears: "Big with his fabled self, he had laboured his dreamworld out." Serious, dedicated, *heavy*: no irony, no dis-

tance.) Yet he does have a good story to tell. The first of anything, puberty, entering the menarche, first sex, even the first goal, is always, and already, a good story. He might call it "Cherry Girl" or even "Cherry Boy" if he could write differently; instead, he calls it simply, in still another Conradian gesture, "Tale". There were, I think now, many good stories for him to tell, perhaps some were even better than what he actually writes. He is blind both to irony and to the ordinary. He can scarcely observe, other than as background detail, regular people doing regular things.

Here is another way to tell a good story.

Quickly, he shut the door behind him. The hall was a single room. It was very deep and poorly lit. He saw into it like looking through smoked-glass. Some men sat around heavy wooden tables playing cards. Later he would learn it was not poker but canasta that they played. He went up to the man behind the counter. The man spoke with a slushy, unfamiliar accent, his nose was splayed to the left and he had a cast in his right eye. The agent was out but he could wait if he wanted. Jerry would be back in a couple of hours. Behind the counter a blackboard listed scribbled job notices. There were two jobs for porters going and one for an oiler. There was nothing for an ordinary seaman. He sat in a straightback chair along the wall and pretended to read a copy of the union newspaper. The man with the cast stared at him from time to time. He felt foreign and uncertain. What would he tell the agent when he returned? That he was a Canadian? That he had sailed on ships manned by the Lake Carriers Association? Or that he had never sailed? Perhaps he would say that he had crewed on an uncle's tug. Something too small to attract the union's attention. If he wanted a permit, he would have to say something that indicated he had experience but hid the fact that he had been a scab. Chicago made him feel wonderful. He loved the buildings and the wide, open views of Lake Michigan. But it made him feel foreign as well. If he had been born here would he still feel so tiny, insignificant and cowed, in the cool, shadow-closed spaces between the buildings?

A large muscular man in an Hawaiian sport shirt came into the hall. He was bald with a fringe of red hair. His face was flushed and his thick, pockmarked nose was crimson. The man with the cast whispered to the big, reddish man and then made a curt beckoning gesture to the boy. As he came up to the counter, he observed how both men stared at him, as if measuring the roll in his walk. The man in the sport shirt bulked over him by several inches. This is Jerry, the man with the cast said. The boy sucked in his breath. I need a permit. I want to sail S.I.U. Jerry looked fixedly and hard. Something was being measured.

Bearing, muscles, accent? Then he smiled. Can you fight? The boy felt weak. The back of his knees trembled. Hell yes, he said. Come on out on the street and find out. The two men laughed. The boy felt like running out the door and down the street to the Illinois Central station as fast as he could. Then Jerry began writing on a slip of paper. SS. Judd, he said. She sails tomorrow morning. She's unloading coal at the Youngstown mill. You can board her tonight. Later, U.S. Coast Guard Z card, permit, job and future in his grasp, he learned from other sailors that the agent, Jerry, had been a professional boxer. He had lasted six rounds with Jersey Joe Walcott. There must have been something special in his laughter. Affection perhaps. Or a tolerance for the absurd.

He might have done fascinating things with that story. The old men playing canasta, for example, who were they? Did they watch him? Why was the room so dark? Was it to mimic the dim lights of forgotten fo'c'sles and passageways? What about the man with the cast? That slushy accent, what was it? What did Jerry see in him other than a clumsy fool? He could not write that story then.

The pedicab stopped. Dismounted, the old woman exchanged quick words with the man who now rested off the saddle slouching upon the handlebars. The boy hesitated, then swung his legs over the footboard. There were no streetlights, the houses were lit, here and there, by lamps. Steep wooden stairs pointed up the side of a hill, and clinging to the top, perhaps a hundred feet above, orange flickerings sketched the outline of other houses. The two Japanese stood eyeing him as if awaiting some obvious decision. Like a man thoroughly spun around, directionless, he remained awkward before them, his right hand resting on the pedicab's cowl. O.K. Joe? Pay. O.K. Joe? The woman bent towards him, skeweyed. He dug for his wallet. How much? Mama-san, how much? Pay thousand. O.K. Joe? A thousand yen! That was nearly five dollars. He would spend that much in a single hour, easily, on beer in San Francisco. Five hundred, he blustered. That will goddamn well do. A thousand's too much.

Unaffected by his loss, the man took the money with a deferential shrug. Surprised that his firmness had been accepted without protest, the boy followed the woman. They climbed up the stairway towards the crest. Rickety, slippery with dirt, the handrail broken in several places, it was clearly much used, indifferently repaired. It proclaimed poverty. From the last step, the boy gingerly behind, the woman picked across a thin line of wooden chocks, smooth in puddles like discs of mud glittering. Amber reflections from half-hidden lamps crinkled on their dark surfaces. A slight rise in the hill remained, and at

the end of the walk he could see a squat, darkened shack. The woman led him into an unfloored porch that was screened with wickerwork. The night breeze had turned cooler on the crest and the boy twitched with the chill as he zipped his jacket up to the neck. Inside, there were three steps up to the main room. Someone lit a dull lamp. The woman crouched to remove her *zori*. She placed them along the bottom step with several others. Another woman, younger, but he couldn't tell by how much, came from the inside room. Both of the women now smiled at him encouragingly. Feeling raw and unskilled, hardly knowing what he should do first, he started in. Shoes Joe! Unexpectedly sharp, the command frightened him. He drew back, confused. The two women, all smiles and bows, tried to reassure him. He must come in, only he must take off his shoes. It was clean. He obeyed.

Once inside, the two women caged him aggressively. Clucking and gesturing hospitably, they edged him to the rear, closing between him and the door, so that he was left, the uncertain apex of a triangle, facing the door from the farthest side of the room. Sparse, neat, it ran rectangularly the breadth of the house, but he could see that the house itself was deeper. Through a crack in the wall where a panel was partly slid back he could make out another room. There were a few spare, decorations, cushions and a couple of stubby tables. The old woman had hunkered down, poking intently at a brazier in which a few embers glowed darkly. He remembered how, precisely in that manner, the longshoremen had squatted about the deck that afternoon, calves to hams, feet splayed, elbows on knees, rocking slightly. On the walls of the front room there were a few faded hangings: a fish swam through a handful of reeds, some plucked landscapes of hillocks and firs. Only the short time in which he had looked around had been enough for him to understand that he had come in among a family, or what was left of one. He felt hesitancy and impropriety, as if he had been caught at something shameful, swelling within him, though he knew that he was doing only what he believed a sailor in a foreign port should do.

Then the younger woman broke the momentary silence, wrenching his shyness into attention. She pointed sharply into the shadows of the second room. It was lower than the large room in which they were standing. He could make out little in the dimness. On the right, curled snugly within a quilt, there was a small body sleeping on a *futon*. Son. The younger woman waved with her forefinger. She pointed, lightly, to the left. He would sleep there. She would call her daughter now. Something like shock waves rippled through him. Look, please, Joe. You like. Sure, he thought, sure he would, bring on the goddman joi-san. The mother lifted her voice, strong, liquid and commanding.

A girl came forward from the recessed shadows of the sleeping room. And he twisted his head to face her, she nodded her body gracefully towards him. She wore a white kimono with patterns of yellow flowers. Little ducks floated around her *obi*. Her smooth face, like toffee, was set off in a wreath of dense black hair. He looked quickly into her eyes, dark brown, glistening, smiling. Twelve, fourteen, he couldn't tell. Could the Mamma-san have told the truth? It wasn't likely, but he felt his groin swell with the rush of blood. Joe, he heard her whisper, and in her upper teeth a gold speck glinted. His indecision knotted itself. Loneliness, the fear that he wouldn't make the ship in time for his watch, the sense of being an intruder, feelings that had worked disparately, fused now. And he felt himself utterly foolish, standing before these strangers in his socks, one toe protruding ignominiously upon the matting.

O.K. Joe? did he like? The Mamma-san would call a cab in the morning. O.K.? The old woman leaned forward, a note of finality in her voice for the first time. The second woman, the mother, took the child's hand and offered it to him. But he shuffled back, fishing in his pockets. Couldn't stay. Really sorry. His ship, see. Had a watch to stand. He spat the words out. Shitty luck for them. Oh, fuck them. His brains floated. Here. He thrust a ten dollar bill into the mother's hand. He could not see the girl's expression, but he felt the bewilderment. The old woman snatched the bill, nuzzling it. Probably it was more money than she had ever seen at one time. Its very queerness must have been exciting. Pushing past the two women, he stepped out onto the porch, stiffly slipping back into this shoes. The cold leather hurt his feet and, flustered, he looked back to apologize once more, only to stammer.

Hurrying, his mind skimming backwards, its functions disoriented, he found the wooden stairway. He looked up at the stars shining dim through a thin veil of smoky clouds. Once more, he felt as if he were floating. Below, a sheen of light thickened coldly towards the port. Icy wedges, flecked with crimson points, distorted, but revealed even so, the hidden forms of ships. Twice he nearly fell, stumbling from step to step. He felt regretful, relieved, a bit pissed off with himself, happy to be heading back to the ship. Reaching the bottom, he saw a small hut, lit with a fire inside that might be a cab stand or a policeman's post.

I like that ending but it doesn't work for him. He needs something weightier, something solid exhaling its symbolism. I think that his character should run towards those frozen wedges of light, uncertain, confused and distraught, towards openness. Then nothing more should follow. But he wants (so acutely that he will write and rewrite

his conclusion) a lapidary closure. Well, let him have tightness and weight. Let him have symbolism. His story can bear the cargo.

As he ran towards the hut, he noticed that his shoes were still untied, the trailing laces caked with filth.