

Sixty-two Percent True

David Sedaris claims he writes nonfiction. “I’ve always been a huge exaggerator, but when I write something, I put it on a scale,” he told *Time* magazine. “And if it’s 97% true, I think that’s true enough. I’m not going to call it fiction because 3% of it isn’t true.” In another interview, he said it was 96%. “That is an acceptable standard for ground beef. And it’s more than acceptable for cocaine and heroin. So I’m going to call it nonfiction. As my American Humorist license says on the back, “May exaggerate with wild abandon for comic effect.” I’m not a reporter. I would appreciate the truth when I read an article in *The New York Times*. But that’s not the kind of writing I do.” He then says his stories are “realish.” I’m thinking that’s like Stephen Colbert’s “truthiness.”

Three people have now asked me to post some of my short fiction. I have two concerns. First, I’m afraid that people will think they’re crap. (Of course, there is the even greater fear of people thinking they’re *not* crap, which will make me feel bad for not writing more fiction.) My second concern is that I say it’s fiction even though some people will clearly recognize themselves or others, or events I may have spoken of previously. While it is true that many, perhaps most, of my stories—I think I’ve written thirty-three of them so far—are based on real people or actual events, in each case I have used them as launching pads for great flights of fancy or, if you prefer, for the most damnable lies. In other cases, I have made things up out of whole cloth, though this will undoubtedly have some friends wondering if this is just something from my past that I haven’t revealed before. So I won’t be able to win, no matter what I do.

My greatest concern is that in an effort to get to the real nugget truth in something—an incident, an emotion, a thought, a relationship—I fear that I will hurt someone I care about. A book I read once—and I’m afraid I no longer remember the author—said that the first rule of being a writer is that one must be willing to kill one’s family, that is, to speak the truth no matter who it hurts. I am not sure I am that brave. I am not sure my truth is greater than another’s dignity or privacy or feelings. So if you recognize something in my stories, take comfort in knowing that someone else will think it’s pure hokum, and I won’t be the one to disabuse them of the notion. And if you think, “This must be one of the completely fictional ones,” then it’s probably about 62% true.

This is the first one I wrote:

Under a Tree

My friends live in a tiny village in an old slate-mining town in Vermont. The quarry, long mined out, is now a swimming hole, though most people prefer to swim in the Mettawee River, the stream that snakes through town and runs through the General

Store. I mean that literally: the store is built on top of the river, and there is a window in the floor through which you can watch the water rushing by.

I wander through town, finding wonderful little strangenesses, like an old woman selling handcrafted dinner plates featuring whimsical impressions in the clay created by small animals that have been flattened by cars and trucks; her business is called Roadkill Pottery.

Up the road, heading out of town, is a cemetery. It's perched on a hill, so one has to drive up a steep incline to get into it.

Some cemeteries I like, some I don't. The one where my parents are buried is run by the Veteran's Administration, and the only way to locate your loved one among all the identical headstones is with a map and a handy designation: East Quadrant, Row 37, Number 23. Flowers are allowed only for three days, after which they are removed, whether they are real or artificial: the government wants nothing to mar the sterility of the landscape.

But this one—ah, here's a cemetery for you! The stones are old, and some are beginning to crumble. All shapes and sizes, though nothing ostentatious. A country graveyard for country people. I walk among the graves, noting how often the same family names appear. Whole generations of a family are buried here together. Parents and children, old people and infants. A groaning Thanksgiving table of the dead.

I catch a glimpse of the lettering on the wrought-iron archway leading into the graveyard: Mountain View Cemetery. How odd. As I stand looking at the great sweep of headstones, no mountain is visible. I decide it's a Vermontism: just as everything in Florida is called Ocean View no matter how far inland one goes, everything in Vermont must be called Mountain View.

I walk on, and am startled by a large black headstone—a newer one, thicker than the others, more imposing. On it is my last name, in bold letters: MCINTYRE. For some reason this unsettles me more than it should. I walk up the hill a piece and sit down under a large and wonderfully shady elm. It's summer, but it feels like a lovely spring day, and I try to collect myself after the tombstone's *memento mori*, its *Et In Arcadia Ego*: Even in your pastoral Arcadian paradise, where you play and love without care, I—death—am there with you.

I settle back, close my eyes, and slow my breathing. When I open them again, in front of me is one of the most beautiful, peaceful mountains I have ever seen. The mountain view is not for the visitors to this cemetery, but for the residents.