

CRITIQUE OF
“[Name of Story Deleted at Author’s Request]”

At *On The Premises*, we want stories to be creative, compelling, well-crafted, and to clearly use the premise. By “well-crafted,” we refer to a story’s grammar, spelling, plot, characterization, and overall architecture, as well as the prose’s evocative power.

Compared to its rival contest entries, we rated “Story” as having generally above average prose and creativity. We found it average in its use of the premise and in how compelling we found it. Ultimately, we think “Story” needs to decide which of its story arcs is its central focus, and then revise its material accordingly.

We think a story’s opening is critical to its success, so we’ll examine this one’s in detail.

For the longest time, like all mothers everywhere, Elaine blamed herself.

We like this opening line. It gives us a character and it implies an interesting situation (something has gone wrong, probably with one of the mother’s kids). The job of a story’s opening is to make the reader want to read past the opening, and we think this one does that.

In fact, we like the prose in this story quite a bit. Maybe in some places it loses some steam, like here:

By the second week, Elaine wanted to scream every time Austin came up to her...

The “wanted to scream” line is, in our view, either a cliché or too strong a reaction. Usually “Story” finds more innovative ways to evoke how Elaine’s feeling. Overall though we like this story’s prose and we don’t think we’d have had much “line” editing to suggest if this one had been selected for publication.

After reading the whole story twice, though, we’re no longer sure this opening fits the story well. This opening is set long after the time frame in which the rest of the story happens. In other words, we are assuming Austin is now a successful trainer of astronauts for NASA. That’s not the job he wanted, but it was probably better than any sensible person could have hoped for, and the story gives us no reason to believe the adult version of Austin is unhappy about how his life turns out. (We’ll bring that idea up again later.) Even so, it seems like she’s still blaming herself for... having a successful adult child with a great job that was almost his dream job.

We tried reading the story starting from the second section, the one that begins “Elaine blamed herself for the Spaceship Stan Show,” and when we did that, we liked the story a lot better. We don’t think the first six paragraphs are necessary, especially since it takes so very long to learn what Joyce is referring to with her Facebook post. I had long forgotten about the opening by the time the ending happens, and I think the ending

works even better without the current opening. So our first advice is to drop the first six paragraphs. (Also, my co-publisher Bethany notes that the first six paragraphs mention Benny's death, and it takes a long time to learn who Benny was. My co-publisher wondered if "Benny" was an editing error – it might have been Austin's name in a previous draft, or something.)

We have one small point to make before we get to the biggest reason we didn't send "Story" to the prize judges.

I have a psych Ph.D., and I don't entirely believe how the story's psychiatrist diagnoses Austin. I agree with the psychiatrist's second idea – autism – but her first diagnosis is delusion, which I have a hard time with. Delusion is, to me, far too strong a word for a kid who wants to hold a job someday that he won't qualify for. Since we're talking about a future that's at least 15 to 20 years away, given how much education and training astronauts need, his unyielding belief that he'll be one someday is probably wrong, but to me, not delusional. Obsessional, yes, because he's utterly inflexible about his thinking, but to me that's the autism coming through. However, consider that with companies like Space X around, who's to say that by the time Austin's an adult, he can't go into space with as much effort as you and I would need today to fly to Australia? For both those reasons, I think "delusion" is a dangerously bad diagnosis and I don't believe a competent psychiatrist would make it.

Back to the story. As time goes on, Austin lives a life of such severe obsession that Elaine has every right to be worried about him. He isn't harming anyone, so I can see why Elaine is both terrified for his future and ultimately unwilling to stand in his way. I *love* the scene where he gets on his bicycle (or motorcycle?) to ride to Texas and apply to be an astronaut. There's no point in explaining how US federal hiring works; he won't pay attention anyway, so Elaine lets him go and find out for himself. (Though one of the first questions he's going to be asked is whether he's a US citizen, and he's Canadian, so I wonder how he dealt with that particular roadblock...)

Now we get to the heart of my concerns about "Story." Is "Story" Elaine's story or Austin's? And if it's Elaine's, which of her two story arcs does "Story" want to focus on?

If Austin's story arc is the most important, then we have to know what happened between his bike ride to freedom and somehow getting praised as a great trainer of astronauts 10-15 years later. We have to, because the transition from "I'm going to be an astronaut no matter what" to "I will never be an astronaut" is Austin's story, and "Story" skips it entirely.

But if it's Elaine's story, then I think the real story arc is her transition from "I did not sign up for this and I have no idea how to handle it" to "I will support my child's dream no matter what." In my opinion, that story arc ends (beautifully) when she tells Austin to start exercising because astronauts have to be in good physical condition.

My co-publisher Bethany thinks Elaine's transition is from doubting herself to trusting herself, in which case, it isn't complete until the end, when she falls against the wall after reading the Facebook post. But if that's the case, then I want to see more of it. What happens in the time when Austin's off on a bike somewhere, completely out of contact? How does Elaine handle the *years* in which she has no idea what's going on? For that matter, why is Joyce the one to find the newspaper story about Austin the astronaut trainer? Wouldn't Elaine be scanning Google News every day for any sign of her son? The story doesn't say. If "Story" is about Elaine's transition from doubt to trust, then we think it needs to talk more about what happens when Austin's gone.

If the story ends with Elaine telling Austin to quit moping and start exercising, that solves another concern I have, too. My favorite scene in this story is the "ride to freedom," yet I can't believe in it. As far as I can tell, Austin has little to no money, presumably no credit cards or legal way to get money, no sense of geography, no map, no way to repair his bike if it gets seriously damaged, and no understanding that most US federal jobs are only open to US citizens. (NASA outsources a lot of its work to contractors, but as far as I know, they don't outsource anything to do with astronauts to contractors, so I'm betting astronaut trainers are federal employees.) So his mother will just let him bike for thousands of miles? Maybe... if she feared for her life. A small percentage of severe autistics get uncontrollably violent (against themselves or others) when frustrated. We don't know enough about how his neurology changes as he ages to know for sure, but if Austin is *that* obsessed – and I could make a case for that based on the story – would Austin gravely harm himself, or his mother, if she tried to stop him from leaving? Does Elaine let Austin go out of fear as much as love? If out of fear, though, wouldn't she call the police on him once he was out of range? For all these reasons, I can't believe in this scene, so as much as I love it emotionally, I think logically it has to either be cut *or* be backed up by a lot more explanation.

To summarize, in many ways we thought "Story" was one of this contest's better entries. Our problem is that we think there's a mismatch between the story's material and what the story wants to be about. We can find three story arcs in "Story," and regardless of which one is intended to take center stage, we think "Story" has too much of what it doesn't need and too little of what it does. For that reason, it didn't make the final round of judging.

Keep reading and writing,

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