

ALSO BY JEROME STERN

Making Shapely Fiction

Micro Fiction:
An Anthology of Really Short Stories (editor)

Florida Dreams (with Gary Monroe)

R | A | D | I | O | S

Short Takes on Life
and Culture

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Drawings by the Author



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frame and the sill, chipping at paint and warped wood. We'd shove and slide and wiggle. After a while, with a creak and a groan, up the window would go. We'd cheer at our victory and the butter knife would go back to its drawer.

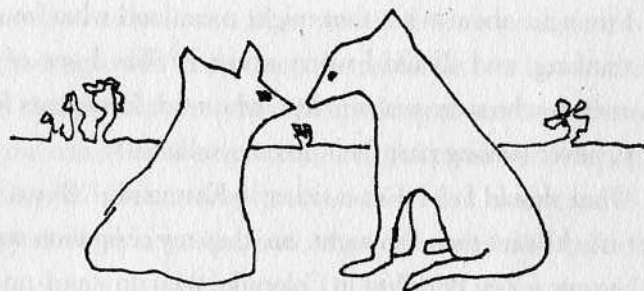
When skate wheels got wobbly or a doorknob spun around, we'd head for the butter knife, our ultimate and only screwdriver to deal with whatever mysteriously loosened itself, no size too small, no angle too difficult.

It pried bike tires off rims, spread glue in scrapbooks, and opened packages from the post office. It stripped wire and separated plastic parts for our model airplanes. With your opposing thumb and a good grip you could tighten bolts. You could mark measurements and have a good straightedge ruler. It hammered nails, knocked jar tops loose, banged open walnuts.

Occasionally someone would even grab it to spread jelly on muffins. Years later when a friend told me about the notion of the right tool for each task, it was a revelation. I hadn't realized we were mechanically deprived. I didn't know we were instrumentally illiterate. We thought we had most problems pretty well in hand.

After all, we had our butter knife.

UNIVERSITY



I was in the office reading term papers, chair tilted back, my feet propped against the edge of the desk. A knock at the door, and a blond, kind of heavy guy, early thirties, looking vaguely familiar, sticks his head in, smiles big, and says, "Hey, just thought I'd drop by and say hello."

It was a student who I hadn't seen in, I don't know, seven years or more, and when he said his name I remembered his quick mind and the class he was in, and some of the other people he hung out with.

He tells me what he's been doing—went to the Coast with a friend, got bit parts in cheapo horror movies, managed a fern

bar, lived in Mexico, worked on a coastal steamer, got deadly ill, finally went to law school, married now with a kid.

And I thought, Here this person has been doing all this and he finds his teacher in the same position he left him seven years ago, feet on the desk, reading term papers.

I thought about what that might mean and what he might be thinking, and should I worry about it? Was I one of those characters who seem never to live, who work forty years for the firm, never looking past their green eyeshades?

What should I do? Get a ticket to Katmandu? Buy a monster truck? And then I thought, no, that my obligation was not to become a Zen Buddhist in Colorado, then do stand-up comedy in New Jersey, get interested in welding, and finally take up large-scale sculpture out of wrecked car chassis. And not to have tempestuous relationships with a historic succession of people who would break tables, wreck cars, have to be dried or bailed out at frequent intervals.

Perhaps it was my calling to do what I love—to read, write, talk about what I learned, think up theories to explain things, and keep my feet on the desk. You return to your college town; the stores you shopped in have vanished utterly, the bars you drank in have different names, the restaurants you ate in are law offices, and the houses you rented have been bulldozed.

The university itself, though, should be the one place where the trees are as green as you remember, the buildings standing just where you left them; the halls should be beige, the posters

should be tattered, the classrooms vaguely grimy. The students scraggly, scruffy, smooth, or sleek, but doing the same things, hanging out, talking on the steps, yelling from cars.

And when you come to a familiar office door you should be able to knock, and have someone look up at you from a desk littered with what looks like what was on it when you left several lifetimes ago, and that person should tilt his head back and say hello in that voice that meant something to you back then.

And you can feel the pleasure that might come from staying in one place to think, to learn, to pass on what meant something to you a long time ago, and what you came back to find.