

COMMENTARY



Wallace Stegner

(1909-1993)

“The Women on the Wall” (1950)

by Stegner

There are so many kinds of stories that one cannot hope, by analyzing or re-creating one, to say anything very definitive about the form. One kind, intensely personal in feeling, deriving often from memory, its origins clouded and obscured by time, its methods so unconscious and undeliberate that the story seems to grow by itself out of some fecund darkness, can reward analysis only if the analysis searches out the whole mental and emotional state of the author during composition, and becomes a kind of personality analysis, a study in Jungian terms of the creative process and the creative personality.

Another kind, built deliberately according to predetermined blueprints, is hardly worth analysis no matter how skillfully it is made, because the skill is all it has; it exists at a rudimentary level, without the difficult and indispensable quality of original design. It is the quality of design which I assume we are after in this series of story re-creations, and what may be valuable in such a study is the simple record of how a story came into being, how the scattered materials of time and place and people and situation and idea and feeling and significant action were subjected to some sort of synthesis and emerged a new thing, with a form of its own.

Almost any professional writer has had stories write themselves for him. I suppose most of us look upon that kind of story with a slight awe: it comes so easily and it leaves no tracks. Almost any writer too has had on occasion to build a story from scanty suggestions or fragmentary experiences, to hew one out by main force. This latter kind lends itself better to critical retrospection because its processes, if not exactly clear, have been at least painful.

‘The Women on the Wall’ is a story that had to be hewn out. It is one of the few I ever wrote directly from a scene and a group of people immediately under my eyes, and perhaps because I knew nothing about any of these people except their external appearance and their general situation, and so was without the help of the gestative processes which memory and the subconscious often perform painlessly, I had a good

deal of difficulty in finding out exactly what my story was about. Action is an easy thing to invent and a hard thing to guide, because to guide it you must know where you want to go.

Since I am engaged in a process of re-creation, let me re-create. The circumstances which gave rise to the story were not in any way unusual; the idea began casually and accidentally, in the middle of a time of letdown and boredom. I had returned to Santa Barbara from New York in the spring of 1945 to recover from an illness and a long stretch of working on racial minorities in the United States. I was in that state of mind collapse that follows the finishing of a book. Habit drove me to my desk after breakfast, but I could think of nothing I really wanted to do there. I wrote letters, or looked out the window across a lovely pine-shrouded point and sunken lane, with the Pacific shining beyond and the mornings so still and temperate that I almost felt the house wallow slightly, like a ship in a dead calm. I smelled the slow warm fume of that little promontory—pine and eucalyptus and wood smoke and *Ceanothus* and kelp, and heard the relaxed swash of surf on the beach.

And I saw the Army and Navy wives who lived in apartments in the old beach club building on the point. Every morning about eleven they began to gather on the stone wall at the end of the lane, and for a half-hour, three-quarters, an hour, sometimes longer, they waited as quietly as patients sunning themselves in a sanitarium garden, until the mailman in his gray car and gray uniform drove up to the row of mailboxes. Perhaps the way that picture formed and broke up every noon, only to re-form again in almost identical shapes and colors the next day, impressed it upon me unduly. Perhaps the women did not have over them the still purity of light that I thought I saw. Nevertheless I saw them waiting there under an intense stillness, a picture of a wistful charm. Before two mornings had passed, what I really did in my study was watch that most beautiful, lulled, enchanted place above the blue and violet sea, with the frieze of bright, still women along the wall.

I have no idea at what point I began to think of them as a story. It was simply apparent after awhile that I felt them with the clarity and force of a symbol, and that I wanted to write them. But you do not write a picture. You do not even write a 'situation' like this of the women waiting patiently at the remote edge of the West, while their husbands fought the Japanese thousands of miles westward across that miraculous water. Waiting was obviously a significant wartime activity, but it was fairly inert stuff to make a story from. The women waited, as women have always waited in wars, and I watched them as avidly as a Peeping Tom. I saw how they were tuned-down, stilled, withdrawn into themselves until they seemed to have little to say even to each other. I heard the surf on the beach below, and the surf was slow and muted. I saw the mornings pass over as even and imperturbable as the muted sea and the waiting women. I knew that these images and shapes of quiescence that came to me might sometime be useful, that they were the images from which an atmosphere could be created, but I did not see any story around which to create an atmosphere.

The images lay around in my mind at random, unconnected, and though I must even in the beginning have had some perception of how everything that struck me as important about those women had a cyclic, reiterative compulsiveness—tides and waves and growing mornings and the gathering along the wall and the climactic and awaited coming of the gray car—I was too interested in the images singly to see their significance en masse. And another confession of almost unbelievable obtuseness: I had watched the women for upwards of a week, and been reminded of Keats's 'On a Grecian Urn' a dozen times, and been impressed every morning freshly by the clear Attic light, the Mediterranean clarity, of the picture the women made. But it was a week before I made the connection with Penelope on the rocky isle of Ithaca above the wine-dark sea waiting her twenty years for Ulysses' return.

That belated perception of the classical parallel took me forward a long step. The very roll and ring of Homer's epithets and the soft thunder of his names added a dimension, dignity, depth. So I found myself with a place, a group of people, a situation, a classical parallel that had the effect of a stereopticon viewer. But I still had no story. I still had only a picture.

I attempted to surprise a story out of the picture by simply beginning, describing the point and the light and the sound of surf and the incense smells and the graceful waiting women. But when I got the picture finished everything stopped. And every attempt I made to invent and import some action fell flat. The

Penelope parallel tempted me into inventing suitors, but they were as out of place in what I had already half-conceived as Keystone cops would have been. I was tempted by the communal, enforced life the women led in the beach club to try a kind of Grand Hotel scheme, following each woman and each woman's husband to a conclusion, whether death or reunion or separation or misunderstanding. But everything I tried was off key, or involved complication enough for a novel. And I kept being pulled back to the picture, just that. After several false starts and ten days of watching, certain things began to be clear.

It was clear that these women fascinated me precisely because they did nothing but wait. The minute I started them acting I falsified them. Their proper story was not a story, but only a repetition and the conflict proper to their lives was only the tugging on the chain that held them. Waiting itself was their essential struggle. They were all thrown out of their normal posture by the war; they lived suspended lives. It was clear too that if I wanted to dramatize that suspension properly, the method must be repetitive. That much I might borrow from the Grand Hotel theme; the effects of waiting must be seen in more than one way and in more than one of the women. And since the conflict here was internal, the story would probably resolve itself down not into a clear line of action, but into a series of uncoverings, all set within the framework of the daily waiting for the mail. The problem, I finally began to see, was not to make action out of this picture, but by moving the picture slightly to reveal what was hidden behind it. This story would develop, certainly, not as a complication resolved but as what Henry James called a 'situation revealed.'

And if revealed, it must be revealed in someone. I had already tried, with a dismal sense of failure, to get at these women from the inside. In the end I adopted the point of view that was at once easiest and most natural—my own, the viewpoint of the external observer. I elected to make my observer a man, for no particular reason; I made him an older man to prevent any suggestion of his being interested in the women for the wrong reasons, and to avoid the necessity of explaining how a young man could be on this secluded bit of beach during wartime. In the end I decided that he had just recently returned from many years on the Galapagos Islands, because as a retired colonial he might be assumed to have a certain innocence, because he would have along with that innocence an interest in rediscovering things in the States, because he could first be impressed and then shocked or startled at the uncoverings I was intending to make. I set his earlier career on the Galapagos only because every night at that time I was playing a game called 'Cargoes' with my son, and almost every night I stopped my marker at the Galapagos for a cargo of turtles.

My story was still not clear to me in detail, but by now I knew what I thought. I thought the waiting women were lovely and symbolic and touching; and I thought that their quiet could not possibly be more than skin-deep, that beneath their muted surface must be a seethe and dart of emotion like a school of small fish just under the unbroken surface of water. I suspected, though I didn't know and don't know yet, that their submission was only apparent and that they were all ready to explode with anger, hysterics, loss, boredom, fear.

Though I certainly did not formulate the notion to myself as I started to write, I had a pattern of reversal all prepared for myself. Whether it is a complication resolved or a situation revealed, fiction normally works either toward surprise or toward recognition. Whichever it works toward, it covers its tracks, it moves by stealth, it pretends to be going the other way. Like a lever, a story needs a fulcrum of opposition on which to get what we used to call 'purchase.' If boy is going to get girl, it usually is rigged so that for most of the story he apparently is going to lose her, and vice versa. So in this story, since the uncoverings were going to reveal unsuspected depths of passion and resentment and resistance in these women, I began with what had been my own first impression: the enchanted point, the breathing sea, the cyclic mornings and tides and mailman, the quiet cataleptic pattern of the women on the wall, the apparent submission to their waiting.

By now I had to know more about my characters than their external appearance. Quite without their consent or knowledge, I gave to one of them, Mrs. Kendall, an adopted child, a warped and bottled-up and prudish interest in sex, and a personal inadequacy matched by her personal loneliness; I gave another an illegitimate unborn child whose father rarely wrote and was constantly in danger of death; to another I gave defiance and a corrective hostility against those outside her own life; to a fourth I gave an intense and nervous temperament, the habit of smoking marijuana, and a husband who preferred combat to his home. I

had my Mrs. Corson smoke marijuana rather than punish highballs because I had recently been working with Mexican youths in Los Angeles and I had marijuana on my mind. So much of what attaches itself or insinuates itself when one is making a story is purest accident; the story growing in the mind becomes a kind of flypaper that catches everything light, everything loose.

The form the story was taking was organic; it could not be separated from the materials, it took on definiteness as the materials clarified themselves. All I had to do was to start my Mr. Palmer where I had started, have him see and admire the women, respect their withdrawal, idealize them as Penelopes, be impressed with the classic purity of their situation. I did this. I allowed Mr. Palmer to try making their acquaintance and I let him be rebuffed, and I had him apologize to himself for their behavior. They were heroically doing what they had to do; they should not be intruded upon. He went back to his role as respectful observer.

Now I needed an incident to bring him close to them again, so that from a certain point on he could become progressively more aware of the seething under the quiet surface. Fate provided me the incident in the form of an unexplained cocker pup who appeared for one whole day in the beach club yard, howled and yipped and mourned for twelve hours, and mysteriously disappeared again. I incorporated him and his adventure bodily, using him not only as a means of characterizing Mrs. Kendall, but also as a symbolic representation...of the way everybody in the story, adult, child, or dog, was tied down helplessly and no relief for it.

Having brought Mr. Palmer into contact with one of the women, Mrs. Corson, I was in shape to have her use him as a screen for one of her marijuana binges. On the pretext of going down to take her daughter for a pony ride, she drives down to a joint and gets her 'reefer.' And being high on marijuana, she is in a condition to break the unspoken agreement of silence that protects the women from outsiders. She can confide in Mr. Palmer that Mrs. Vaughn, six months pregnant, has no husband but the one who was killed at Dieppe, three years before. She can give away Mrs. Kendall's secret of the adopted child and take a catlike claw or two at Mrs. Kendall's prudery, fussiness, self-righteousness. Finally she can involve herself in a screaming catfight with Mrs. Kendall, and in the course of it Mr. Palmer can learn about her too, what makes her pupils so large, what is the source of her furious and demented energy.

In that series of scenes the reversal is completed, the idyllic and wistful picture Mr. Palmer started with has been violently shoved aside and the turmoil of suffering and frustrated humanity it has covered is revealed. And for an ending—there is no ending, actually, since there is no story but only a revelation, what Joyce called an 'epiphany'—I had no choice but to drop the original picture back into place. Being cyclic, the story must return upon itself. I closed out the catfight with the coming of the mailman, and the resubmission of all the women to the monotony of their lives. That ending recommended itself not merely as a way of getting out of the rather melodramatic scene of the women fighting, but also as a structural symbol. If the structure and intention of the story are legitimate, this ending ought to have the power of closing the circle, returning us to where we began but with the added understanding and insight that a round trip behind the scenes has provided."

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