

person, consider whether cumulative sentences or short sentence fragments would help you present the person more vividly or express your feelings more emphatically.

In the next selection, a daughter portrays her father, a man for whom she feels strong ambivalence. The essay was written by Jan Gray, a college freshman. Notice, as you read this piece, how Gray uses description to convey her feelings about her father.

FATHER
JAN GRAY

My father's hands are grotesque. He suffers from psoriasis, a chronic skin 1 disease that covers his massive, thick hands with scaly, reddish patches that periodically flake off, sending tiny pieces of dead skin sailing to the ground. In addition, his fingers are permanently stained a dull yellow from years of chain smoking. The thought of those swollen, discolored, scaly hands touching me, whether it be out of love or anger, sends chills up my spine.

By nature, he is a disorderly, unkempt person. The numerous cigarette burns, 2 food stains, and ashes on his clothes show how little he cares about his appearance. He has a dreadful habit of running his hands through his greasy hair and scratching his scalp, causing dandruff to drift downward onto his bulky shoulders. He is grossly overweight, and his pullover shirts never quite cover his protruding paunch. When he eats, he shovels the food into his mouth as if he hasn't eaten for days, bread crumbs and food scraps settling in his untrimmed beard.

Last year, he abruptly left town. Naturally, his apartment was a shambles, 3 and I offered to clean it so that my mother wouldn't have to pay the cleaning fee. I arrived early in the morning anticipating a couple hours of vacuuming and dusting and scrubbing. The minute I opened the door, however, I realized my task was monumental: Old yellowed newspapers and magazines were strewn throughout the living room; moldy and rotten food covered the kitchen counter; cigarette butts and ashes were everywhere. The pungent aroma of stale beer seemed to fill the entire apartment.

As I made my way through the debris toward the bedroom, I tried to deny 4 that the man who lived here was my father. The bedroom was even worse than the front rooms, with cigarette burns in the carpet and empty bottles, dirty dishes, and smelly laundry scattered everywhere. Looking around his bedroom, I recalled an incident that had occurred only a few months before in my bedroom.

I was calling home to tell my mother I would be eating dinner at a girlfriend's 5 house. To my surprise, my father answered the phone. I was taken aback to hear his voice because my parents had been divorced for some time and he was seldom at our house. In fact, I didn't even see him very often.

"Hello?" he answered in his deep, scratchy voice. 6

"Oh, umm, hi Dad. Is Mom home?" 7

"What can I do for you?" he asked, sounding a bit too cheerful. 8

"Well, I just wanted to ask Mom if I could stay for dinner here." 9

"I don't think that's a very good idea, dear." I could sense an abrupt change 10
in the tone of his voice. "Your room is a mess, and if you're not home in ten
minutes to straighten it up, I'll really give you something to clean." Click.

Peddalling home as fast as I could, I had a distinct image of my enraged 11
father. I could see his face redden, his body begin to tremble slightly, and his
hands gesture nervously in the air. Though he was not prone to physical violence
and always appeared calm on the outside, I knew he was really seething inside.
The incessant motion of those hands was all too vivid to me as I neared home.

My heart was racing as I turned the knob to the front door and headed for 12
my bedroom. When I opened my bedroom door, I stopped in horror. The dresser
drawers were pulled out, and clothes were scattered across the floor. Everything
on top of the dresser—a perfume tray, a couple of baskets of hair clips and
earrings, and an assortment of pictures—had been strewn about. The dresser
itself was tilted on its side, supported by the bed frame. As I stepped in and
closed the door behind me, tears welled up in my eyes. I hated my father so
much at that moment. Who the hell did he think he was to waltz into my life
every few months like this?

I was slowly piecing my room together when he knocked on the door. I 13
choked back the tears, wanting to show as little emotion as possible, and quietly
murmured, "Come in." He stood in the doorway, one hand leaning against the
door jamb, a cigarette dangling from the other, flicking ashes on the carpet,
very smug in his handling of the situation.

"I want you to know I did this for your own good. I think it's time you started 14
taking a little responsibility around this house. Now, to show you there are no
hard feelings, I'll help you set the dresser back up."

"No thank you," I said quietly, on the verge of tears again. "I'd rather do it 15
myself. Please, just leave me alone!"

He gave me one last look that seemed to say, "I offered. I'm the good guy. 16
If you refuse, that's your problem." Then he turned and walked away. I was
stunned at how he could be so violent one moment and so nonchalant the next.

As I sat in his bedroom reflecting on what he had done to my room, I felt 17
the utmost disgust for this man. There seemed to be no hope he would break
his filthy habits. I could come in and clean his room, but only he could clean up
the mess he had made of his life. But I felt pity for him, too. After all, he is my
father—am I not supposed to feel some responsibility for him and to love and
honor him?

Questions for analysis

1. Gray opens the essay by describing her father's hands as "grotesque." Why do you think she focuses on his hands? What impression does this opening have on you as a reader?

2. What does the anecdote in paragraphs 5–16 convey about her father and their relationship?

3. How does Gray use dialogue to reveal her father's character? Notice her father's choice of words and her description of his tone and posture.

4. Notice the parallel between Gray cleaning up her father's apartment and him tearing apart her room. What does this parallel suggest about their relationship?

5. Look again at the descriptions of the disorder in her father's apartment and her own room (paragraphs 3, 4, and 12). How does Gray make these scenes so vivid? What strategies of naming and detailing does she employ? (These strategies are discussed in Chapter 14: Describing.)

6. What seems to you the significance of the description of disorder in her father's apartment and her room? Why does she describe the disorder in such detail? What does it add to your understanding of her relationship with her father?

7. Imagine writing about someone with whom you had a serious conflict. Whom would you write about? How would you present this person? What overall impression of this person and of you would you like your readers to get from this essay?

Commentary

Although description of place often plays a minimal role in essays about remembered people, it can be an important feature, as it is in this essay. Gray needs to describe her room and her father's apartment to show how destructive her father could be and how out of control his life was. Gray compiles long lists of things she sees, using specific names and sensory details to describe them vividly. She uses a stationary vantage point to orient her readers as she describes the rooms.

PURPOSE AND AUDIENCE

Just how a writer deploys the features common to essays about remembered people depends on the writer's subject, purpose, and readers. Essays about remembered people are as purposeful as arguments, and writers of portraits generally have several purposes in mind. Perhaps the most prominent is better understanding the subject and his or her importance in the writer's life—analyzing and reaching conclusions about a significant personal relationship. Another purpose can be self-presentation, leading readers to see the writer in a particular way. Still another purpose can be entertaining readers with a vivid portrait of an unusual or engaging subject.

Since writing about remembered people is so personal, you might think that writers write only for themselves, but such is not the case. The writer must select and organize details so that readers can easily imagine persons or scenes. Unless readers' imaginations are engaged through vivid details, the portrait will seem to them flat and lifeless. The writer must also shape and pace anecdotes to hold readers' attention. In addition, writers hope that no matter how unusual their subject, readers will recognize in the portrait a

Reaching Significance was awarded to the pair. In your own words, how do the lives of Keller and Sullivan live up to that description? Use details from the essay, your own conclusions based on your reading about Keller, and your observations about other handicapped adults in forming your answer.

2. In paragraphs 5-7, Ross describes how Helen Keller learned to speak. How does the author use detail to make this difficult process easy for the reader to understand? Choose something you have learned to do or have taught someone else to do that is difficult to explain—for example, learning to ride a bicycle, learning to walk, or learning to whistle. Consider the kinds of details you will need to include or exclude in order to say everything you need to say in the fewest possible words.

My Father, the Prince

Phyllis Theroux

Phyllis Theroux was born in San Francisco in 1939. A graduate of Manhattanville College, she has worked as a secretary, a school teacher, and a legal researcher. As a writer she has been a frequent contributor to the "Hers" column in the New York Times as well as to Reader's Digest, the Washington Post, and McCall's. In 1980, Theroux published her first book, California and Other States of Grace: A Memoir.

"My Father, the Prince" is taken from her second book, *Peripheral Visions*, a collection of autobiographical essays published in 1982. In describing her father and his special gift to her, Theroux also probes the crucial relationship that exists between all fathers and daughters.

Fathers. They say that a woman seeks—in love, marriage, or any male-female relationship of real heft—to approximate the father she had, the father she didn't have but wanted, or the father minus the attributes that caused her mother to leave him for good and sufficient reason. In the winning-out process that precedes deep commitment to a new man, the daughter subconsciously throws up the wheat of her father's virtues along with the chaff of his faults, and her decision to commit is strongly influenced by that first experience of male companionship.

I think they're right.

We all know that men consider their mothers when they choose a woman for themselves, but fathers have traditionally been considered mere linkages in the rosary of wombs that produce progeny from one decade to the next. Accessories to the fact, off-campus providers, fathers are six o'clock visitors to the nursery tended by all-powerful mothers.

One can scarcely overestimate the influence that mothers have upon their sons. But fathers have yet to be properly weighed in

as determinative factors in the lives of their daughters. To my way of thinking, this is a terrible oversight.

In a grayer, more small-minded period of my life, I used to inwardly gripe at the inaccuracy of the Cinderella story. Cinderella does not go from ashes to amethysts. In real life the brooms and the dustpans materialize after the wedding, whereupon she spends forever after staring out the window wondering where her father—the real prince in her life—has gone.

Of course, women are now rewriting that old script, and this is an age in which we are forming piano-moving companies, hiking up telephone poles, and swimming along with Jacques Cousteau. But I live with a little woman, aged seven, who recently gave me to understand that liberation is an acquired taste and no substitute for gut feeling.

"What's this?" I asked as she handed me a crayon drawing of a little girl next to what looked like a giant lollipop.

"Me," she answered. (There was a crown drawn on the little girl's head.)

"And what are you doing?" I pursued, searching the drawing for some evidence of a plot line.

"Nothing," she said matter-of-factly. "Just standing by the bus stop waiting for the prince."

I put the drawing aside, looked at my matter-of-fact daughter, and thought with chagrin, "Aren't we all!" Spoiled or despoiled by the first prince in our life, we understand, either way, what it means to be born to the purple. No, Cinderella did not accidentally fall for royalty. Her dear departed father had given her an early taste for it. My father did the same.

He was a tall, crooked-toothed, curly-haired man, who smelled of Lucky Strikes and St. Johns Bay Rum shaving lotion. He was the only father who wore penny loafers on business trips, a Mouseketeer hat to pick up my brother on his first movie date, and had the delicious gall to invite the richest girl in my class (she had her own pool but an exclusive number of invitations) to come on over to the house ("When you're free, of course") and watch our lawn sprinklers.

"Sometimes we get them going in opposite directions to each other," he said dryly, "and it's terribly amusing."

The richest girl in the class laughed nervously, I choked back

my borrowed triumph, and savored the fact that once again my father had effectively punched out the opposition on my behalf. He had a gift for it.

Yet, unlike other men blessed with a quick wit and a rare natural electricity of being, my father was oddly incapable of parlaying his gifts to his own long-range advantage.

As I grew older and more able to observe him objectively in group situations, I noticed that in a room full of peers he would usually back up against the mantel and go into a sort of social receivership that did not jibe with my understanding of him. It made me impatient. He was far and away the largest talent in the room, and it seemed a terrible waste to give over the floor to anyone else. Yet he consistently passed up opportunities to reveal himself in public, and it was many years before I realized that my wonderful father was *shy*.

I was thunderstruck. Is Douglas Fairbanks, Jr., shy? Does Cary Grant falter? Should my father have anything in the world to hesitate over?

It was one thing to be a pudgy, preadolescent girl trying to make it in a class full of gazelles, but quite another thing to be that little girl's handsome father, who at various crucial junctures had told her that all she had to do in order to succeed was to take this step, or that action, and—for heaven's sake—was the world such a difficult nut to crack after all? Of course not!

If there was any one thing that my father did for me when I was growing up it was to give me the promise that ahead of me was dry land—a bright, marshless territory, without chuckholes or traps, where one day I would walk easily and as befitting my talents. The fact that I didn't know what my talents were did not put my father off in the slightest. He knew potential when he saw it.

Thus it was, when he came upon me one afternoon sobbing out my unsuccesses into a wet pillow, that he sat down on the bed and, like a strong, omniscient archangel, assured me that my grief was only a temporary setback.

Oh, very temporary! Why he couldn't think of any other little girl who was so talented, so predestined to succeed in every department as I was. "And don't forget," he added with a smile, "that we can trace our ancestry right back to Pepin the Stupid!"¹

¹ A medieval French ruler.

That last piece of news turned out to be true, but whether he believed the rest of his words or not I don't know. He was, after all, gazing down upon a disheveled ten-year-old who was too embarrassed to shift her gum from one cheek to the other.

But I listened to him carefully, and by the time he had finished talking I really did understand that someday I would live among rational beings, and walk with kind, unvindictive people who, by virtue of their maturity and mine, would take no pleasure in cruelty and would welcome my presence among them as an asset. It was only a question of time before I came ripping out of my cocoon, a free-flying butterfly that would skim triumphantly over the meadow of my choice. I cannot say that my father was completely wrong.

Time has passed. Choices have been made. I am no longer a preteen in a net formal who secretly hoped that all the other girls at the Father-Daughter Dance were eating their hearts out. My father's crooked front tooth was replaced several years ago by a nice, straight, shiny one. He has passed through the hospital several times. There are grandchildren. I sometimes think that it is not the same between us, or perhaps it never was what I thought.

One's memory is selective, and I admit that it's to my advantage to recall only those moments when my father rose to the occasion and parted another Red Sea of Impossibility² and elbowed me across. Yet these moments really did happen and I am not the same because of them.

There are some people, my father is one of them, who carry the flint that lights other people's torches. They get them all excited about the possibilities of an idea, the "can-do" potential of one's own being.

That was my father's gift to me, and whatever psychic wounds remain to be thrashed out between us are still lying on the floor of my unconscious, waiting for deep therapy to uncover. The fact is that I am closer to my mother. But they say that a daughter carries around the infection of her father for life. They are right.

² Refers to the miraculous parting of the actual Red Sea by Moses during the Israelites' escape from Egypt (Exodus 21–29).

Questions on Subject

1. What does Theroux mean by her title, "My Father, the Prince"? In what way was her father a prince?
2. How does the Cinderella story fit into Theroux's description? What point is she making with the anecdote about her daughter's drawing?
3. What was Theroux's father's special "gift" to her? What does this gift have to do with his ability to "punch out the opposition" (paragraph 14), as well as his shyness?
4. Has Theroux's view of her father changed over the years? If so, how?

Questions on Strategy

1. Theroux's description of her father doesn't actually begin until paragraph 12. What function or functions do paragraphs 1–11 serve? (Glossary: *Beginnings*)
2. Two paragraphs in the essay—the second and the last—are linked in several interesting ways. What function do they serve in the overall context?
3. Theroux tells us very little about her father's physical appearance. How, then, does she actually describe him? Do you feel that you know what he is like?
4. Theroux's essay is drawn from her own experience and observations, yet she writes: "They say that . . ." (1); "We all know that . . ." (3); "One can scarcely overestimate . . ." (4); and, again, "But they say that . . ." (27). Why do you suppose Theroux chooses not to limit herself to the first-person *I*, particularly at the beginning and the end?

Questions on Diction and Vocabulary

1. Theroux makes effective use of figurative language in this essay. For example, she says "the daughter subconsciously throws up the wheat of her father's virtues along with the chaff of his faults" (1), and she refers to herself as a "pudgy, preadolescent girl trying to make it in a class full of gazelles" (18). Locate several other figures

- of speech and comment on their contributions to this essay. (Glossary: *Figures of Speech*)
2. Refer to your desk dictionary to determine the meanings of the following words as they are used in this selection: *left* (paragraph 1), *amethysts* (5), *chagrin* (11), *despoiled* (11), *gall* (12), *parlaying* (15), *receivership* (16), *omniscient* (20), *psychic* (27).

Writing Assignments

1. In an essay, describe your mother, your father, or another adult who has been an important influence in your life. Use your description not only to create a portrait of the person, but also to clarify your relationship and its effect on you. In selecting details for your description, keep in mind that personality traits can be just as important, if not more so, than physical characteristics.
2. Using library sources, write a descriptive essay about a person you have never met, perhaps a present-day celebrity or a historical figure. Whether your description is objective or impressionistic, try to create a dominant impression of your subject.

Twenty-seven-twenty-two

Bob Greene

Bob Greene was born in 1947 in Columbus, Ohio. He is a syndicated columnist for the Chicago Tribune, and his column appears in 150 newspapers throughout the United States. The Pittsburgh Press called Greene "The best national columnist in his weight class," and the San Francisco Chronicle called him "Refreshingly warm, compassionate, interested, amused, and amusing. . . ." Greene has written ten books, the most recent being his study of Vietnam veterans, *Homecoming: When the Soldiers Returned from Vietnam*.

The following selection is taken from *American Beat*, a collection of Greene's essays published in 1983. In the Introduction to the book, Greene comments on his work: "I try to go out and explore something that interests me, and then—after hanging around and watching and listening and asking questions—I try to give the reader some sense of what it was like to have been there."

Bexley, Ohio—It was a vacation of sorts, perhaps the strangest I have ever taken. And, although it had none of the glamour of a flight to Mexico or Europe, it turned out to be one of the most satisfying few days I have had in years.

Of all the places I have dreamed of visiting, I have been lucky enough to visit most. And yet the place that is always most on my mind always seemed an impossible destination. Not because it is remote; it is not that far a journey from Chicago to central Ohio. Not because it is expensive, either; money is not even a factor.

But it remained unlikely because people just don't do things like this. What I wanted to do was go back to the house in which I grew up; not just look at it from a car driving by, but spend time there, visit it, remember it as it was. Several families have lived there since my own family moved away; often I have thought about