

From *Life, and How It Gets That Way*

This is a **partial sample**, the beginning of this story that appears in the book: *Life, and How It Gets That Way*. As all of the stories are quite different, it will still give a reader the feel of some of the writing. Two **other samples, which are very different**, follow this one. This is in the form of the book, 6" X 9".

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## The Waiting Game

"I have realized that the past and the future are real illusions, that they exist only in the present, which is what there is and all there is."

Alan Watts

I. He sat. He waited. And then he waited some more. Was he getting good at it? Harry wondered. It takes practice, he thought. Maybe that's why God gave so many people such big cushions. He waited. So much of life seemed to be lost waiting in lines, on the phone, waiting for lunch and the whistle to blow. Hadn't he waited for Democrats to be honest with themselves, waited for Republicans to be honest with anyone? After so much waiting and waiting, you'd think you'd get good at it, he thought, but then again there was death to consider, death, always waiting in the wings.

How much time was left? Decades? Minutes? He wasn't sure just how much waiting he could bear. How can you find out except to endure? Maybe he'd find out. He thought about patience as long as he could think about it, much longer than most people would. What year was this, what decade, how much time left, how much life? Did it matter? Yes. Everything turned on this, and things could turn real quick. He could feel it.

He wasn't sure what set him off. It was a sound, but what was it? He should know that sound, and what was that smell?

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II. He sat in the car, eyes closed, and listened. Silence. He listened intently, but heard nothing other than the usual morning sounds. A few birds. The slight and subtle rustle of the breeze through the leaves on the trees. A car starting up down the street. With the sweat still rolling down his forehead, it was that musty smell of the '32 Ford's damp upholstery that filled his nostrils. Damp once, and followed by a musty smell forever.

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Now, he felt the tension mounting by the second. Only minutes before he'd skillfully coasted the black Ford, engine off, quietly to a stop in his driveway and gingerly pulled on the emergency brake. Maybe it was the rising tension but now it was very still, very quiet, and he was hearing nothing, nothing at all, and perhaps he was blocking everything else out.

It was one of those steamy hot summer days without sunshine, oppressive with the mid-morning heat rising, filled with nothing but gray. Vapors rose from the damp brick street in ghostly, eerie clouds in front of the row of houses. And here he sat, Harry, at once feeling like a scared boy and yet sure like a man. Paradox. Harry didn't know whether he could go all the way through with this, but he'd soon find out. He'd just do it, he thought, but if it isn't smooth it won't be any good and how could he bear that? But he knew he'd do it. If it didn't go right, well, it had been a pretty good life so far. Mostly.

He took the .38 Smith & Wesson from the glove compartment and stared at it, feeling the weight of it. His fingers were slippery on the steel, on the wood handle. He wondered if everybody's hands sweat this much just before. Is that why the knurling is so important, to let you grip it as tight as you can for a sure shot even with the sweat rolling? Yeah, must be. He raised his hand above the thin steel horn ring, poised, ready to strike the horn to sound the beginning to this whole messy chain of events, but he wasn't ready. He withdrew his hand, and surprisingly found he was holding his breath - now he felt he couldn't breathe.

Harry took some deep breaths to get calm and get that control back. He closed his eyes again for a minute and leaned his head back, breathing in, breathing out. I just need a second, he told himself, just a second, 'cause timing's important here, and...

In all of a second or two visions of Marge, pictures, short reels of memory, and stills rushed through his head. Here was the single most important day of his life, Marge in what she called her sun suit, a short yellow piece with white, he remembered, and they were on the top of the hill, like in a movie, in a dream. Snapshot, from above, broad smile, lips parted over white teeth, cheeks nicely rounded, eyes dancing blue with a hint of gray. The incredible sparkle, the life, the promise, the day.

She was vibrant, light, happy, and he couldn't get enough of her. They were in the deepest contact possible, walking, thinking, talking, all this with their eyes reaching into the other's soul, caressing each other's being, being wholly just perfect, holding nothing but hands. It was the most perfect dance, the most sensational day of his life. Before the words had left his lips, "Marry me..." her eyes said yes forever.

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Harry snapped back to the present. “That bitch,” he cursed, and without hesitation or thought he jabbed his hand down twice on the thin steel horn rim, and the Ford gave off its sharp calls to action, the horn's sounds vibrating and echoing in the still air. In the next few seconds someone in the house parted a curtain for an instant, and the show was rolling.

He slid the .38 into his belt, and waited, listening carefully. The seconds went by as if in slow motion. Time slowed down. He waited for the sound he knew so well, from years of sitting in his kitchen and on his back porch, waited for the sound he was certain would follow. If that sound didn't come, the game would shift, the stakes would go higher, and the balance would be lost. He listened keenly, his hand no longer sweating as he gripped the door handle, with temples pounding. He waited.

Then he heard it.

And what comes next?

This is a sample start of *The Waiting Game*, the full story appearing in *Life, and How It Gets That Way*.

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See other samples **below** from *The Last Tango in Cleveland*, and then, *Picasso, Three Breasts, and the FBI*.

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## Last Tango in Cleveland

### “Cleveland Rocks”

A theme song of the Drew Carey TV Show by the group, The Presidents of the United States of America

“I love the normalcy of Cleveland. There's regular people there.”

Drew Carey

Alex didn't know that when that door opened it would be a new beginning. He couldn't know that in a flash, in just a moment or two, events would begin that signaled a major life change was coming. Later Alex would think of it kind of like being struck by lightning. Life would now be all that happened before the lightning struck, and then everything that happened after, a dividing line, a turning point, a departure. Nothing alerted him to this, nor prepared him. All that Alex did was simply cross a threshold, take a first step, completely ignorant of what was to come.

If life was a dance, if a relationship with a woman was a dance, Alex wasn't dancing much. He was numb most of the time, how he described his feelings when he managed to put them into words. At very least he hovered just above dark and gloomy. Life seemed as drab as the Cleveland skies were most of the time, and he felt that hope was somehow slipping away because he couldn't see how anything would be different in the future, given the course of things. And as for the sky over Cleveland, he'd looked it up: 78 days a year were sunny - that is, completely sunny - all the rest partly cloudy or partly this or rain, snow, fog. Seventy-eight days translated to only one sunny, bright, clear day out of every five. That's all. That fits, Alex thought. Cleveland! And the only thing he could do was laugh instead of cry when he heard the Carter family sing the lyric, “Keep on the sunny side, always on the sunny side, keep on the sunny side of life...” These feelings that he had were just feelings, and not something obvious and ever present. He could hide them, put them aside if he wanted to get through life, work, make friends, get along. And so he did, doing the best that he could do in most things, given his circumstances.

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Alex found himself on Berkshire Road in front of Carol and Ralph's apartment building in Cleveland Heights, standing there after parking his blue Toyota and looking up at the sky through the tree limbs. Gray, of course, and it looked like it might rain - might clear - always hard to tell. He'd called and talked to Ralph and asked if he could come over to visit. Ralph said to come ahead; they weren't doing anything, and had just finished their Sunday breakfast. Alex simply had to get out of the apartment. He chose to visit Ralph and Carol's simply to get out and to be going somewhere, anywhere, or doing something, anything. Even if it was to be an inane chat it was better than sitting around with Alex's wife with nothing to say to her, nothing to talk about, no money to do anything, and nothing that he could think of that would break the misery that seemed to lock them into the same, worn, threadbare patterns. Out. Out is where he had to go.

As he stood there on the sidewalk gazing at the sky he felt far older than his 25 years. "I never thought my life would be like this," he said out loud. No one was around to hear him. "Never." With good jobs very hard to come by his job as a social worker in the mental hospital was just this side of dismal, paralleling his marriage of 5 years that felt like 10. Adding to this joy Alex was in debt to doctors and one Cleveland medical hospital equal to a little more than his annual salary. It was overwhelming. All his money, outside of rent, food, and gas, went to pay off debt, and so they were perpetually broke. Paying these debts off at this point was stretching into years. While her getting pregnant was accidental, his wife had decided to have an abortion, decided pretty much on her own ("I'm doing it and that's that!"). It went south, botched by a butcher doctor (too long a story to tell), much bleeding, and simply awful. She was hospitalized for many days. He had gotten her pregnant, simply rolling over on top of her half asleep one morning. This was before the hospitalization insurance went into effect: no coverage. Add to all of this a truckload of hard feelings and resentment all the way around, as well as the unspoken feelings that getting married in the first place had been a mistake of mammoth proportions. Mammoth. When his parents got in a jam and needed money and asked him for help, he had nothing to give; nothing but sympathy. He had no choice, and he felt morose. That he was numb much of the time seemed much better, like a good thing.

He remembered the book he'd read some time ago, *Been Down So Long It Seems Like Up to Me*, by Richard Farina. And Alex previously felt a little like the main character, who was not "down," and who described himself as "exempt," meaning he was above the ordinary and outside of anything really bad happening to him, that there was nothing he couldn't overcome. Exempt. Alex

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had gotten all the way through college feeling extremely confident and that he could handle and manage and rise above any situation. He had wiggled and finagled his way out of traps and difficulties all the way up to graduation.

And here was Richard Farina, a published writer and a really good one, good looking, married to Mimi Baez, Joan Baez's sister, and one hot young woman. He's a song writer, too, and a singer that could have challenged or rivaled one of his friends, Bob Dylan, with a career that had stretched out in front of him like a wide open highway. Promising. To Alex, Farina seemed to have it all and he was a little jealous: writer, singer, songwriter, etc. And then he found that Richard Farina had died instantly as a passenger in a motorcycle accident, 90 miles an hour on a tight S curve. Young. Not exempt after all. And Alex should have learned from that, as one bad decision after another seemed to plague him, that he'd entered an S curve of life while not realizing it, from college graduation all the way up to the present. Not only did it not get any better, it got worse. Not exempt at all. Standing there on Berkshire, sans exemption, Alex shook his head at how screwed up his life had seemed to become, and entered the building.

In the lobby he stopped at the large vertical mirror bordered by faux gold leaf briefly to check his looks. He was still tall and thin, still with light brown hair that, out of place, he now straightened. Distinctive hazel eyes. He was nice looking overall, while he didn't feel that way, and Alex took his looks for granted because it seemed like: "Yeah? So what?" To him his looks were: null, neutral, average, commonplace. "Same old me," he thought, as he tucked in his shirt and then headed for the stairs.

He found their door on the second floor and knocked hard. The door was so heavy and thick that hard knocking made only little rapping sounds, and even hurt his knuckles some. Alex heard several muffled voices on the other side, which surprised him. The apartment door swung wide open.

"Hi! Come on in," said Ralph with his usual grin, "how'ya doin'?"

He must have said hello and shaken hands and made some small talk with Ralph, but it was like someone else was doing this. Hardly conscious of Ralph or what was being said to him, his eyes and attention went fast to the stranger, completely riveted to the woman sitting there on the floor in front of the coffee table, as if she was a magnetic.

Talking with Carol, she was mostly turned sideways to him, in profile, knees pulled up with her arms wrapped around them. Their conversation was animated. Alex was surprised that anyone was there early on a Sunday morning, expecting to find only Carol and Ralph. Who was she, he wondered. She wasn't beautiful, but she was indeed striking - nice looking, certainly, but

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to Alex, extremely attractive. She had a freshness, exuded a certain confidence, and yet a vulnerability at the same time. There was something else about her that Alex couldn't quite grasp, an x quality, a mystery, something inside that she projected out to the world that was hard to describe. She had brown hair that hung fairly long down her back, light brown, a maroon sweater, blue jeans, brown shoes, and a clear complexion with soft facial features. Medium height. Well built? He wouldn't have said so, but it seemed she had a nice figure, leaning only slightly toward thin.

Alex sat down on the couch, still sideways to her, after nodding a hello to Carol who was enthusiastically explaining something to the woman. Alex was expecting an introduction that never came. That's Ralph for you, and sometimes Carol. Social skills? They never learned? They were talking about some project they were working on. Her voice was soft and resonant as she spoke to Carol, fully engaged, not looking toward Alex at all. While mostly in profile he could see soft blue eyes with a hint of something far off, sculpted lips parting over straight white teeth, and soft curves beneath her sweater: shoulders, arms, breasts. "Nice. Nice..." he thought.

From the moment Alex had walked in she had begun gathering her things, a notebook, some papers on the table, still talking but clearly making motions to go. It was as if she thought she should wrap things up, that someone else had come to visit, and she had a busy day ahead with other things to do. Ralph was talking to Alex about something and Alex was nodding and mumbling, "Uh huh." As she pulled on her dark blue jacket and said her goodbyes to Carol, then Ralph, she glanced at Alex for a millisecond, no more, as if he was hardly there, as if there was nothing to say. No hello, no recognition. The whole time that she was looking in Carol's direction and engaged with her, Alex was able to watch her, study her, and to wonder about her. He was intrigued. All this took no more than a minute or so, from the instant that the door opened until it closed behind her and she was gone. His eyes had been on her the whole time. They hadn't said a word to each other, not a hi or goodbye. It didn't matter; probably not appropriate. They didn't know each other, they weren't introduced, and didn't even know the other's name. Only on the surface, on the most superficial level, however, could you say that it wasn't an encounter. It was exactly that to Alex; he was stirred.

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Another sample follows...

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## Picasso, Three Breasts, and the FBI

“Art is a lie that makes us realize truth.”

Pablo Picasso

When Vicky asked Denise what she remembered most from her relationship long ago with Frank, Denise had to stop and think. Years had drifted by like leaves floating slowly down a stream, sinking then into decades, leaving behind only what could be called broad landscapes and puddles of time, places, events, people, experiences. Way back in time, way back was Frank and Kent State University, Kent, Ohio, the 1960s. The seventies. Like ancient history. Denise paused to think, as if she was slowly drawing out very thin threads of memories, one by one, out of a thick fabric buried in an old trunk in the attic. Slowly she remembered a salty taste in her mouth, a bitter taste mixed with a very slight sweetness on her tongue. She remembered the sweat, too. Denise recalled how hot Frank’s hands were on her, a vibrant heat that spread and then went deep, how she quivered and shook, the excitement and the intensity they generated that was flat out electric, the ecstasy when they drove at each other like two stars colliding in space in a shattering explosion. Dirt and rocks everywhere. She remembered, and she swallowed hard. She thought about sitting at a table at Ray’s Place and getting wet waiting for Frank to come back from the Men’s Room so they could leave and go back to Frank’s.

“He often called me a ditz or a dweeb,” she said to Vicky, and that she didn’t really know what those meant, not specifically or exactly, not strict definition-wise anyway, but they were on the order of stupid, thick, dull. What passed between them was so damn hot that she didn’t care what he called her. A ditz. That’s what she told Vicky, and the reality of Denise being a ditz was a dead-on description. Frank hit the nail on the head if that cliché can be forgiven. She told Vicky how smart Frank was, and how he was always talking to her about his writing, writing in general, and art, philosophy, even politics. And Denise told Vicki about the sex, the positions, all the crazy hot things they

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did, and in detail, which was really all that Vicky wanted to hear about. Politics and philosophy don't get most women wet unless they're a little strange and a bit around the bend in those directions, and Vicki wasn't. She began to imagine Frank naked because she'd only heard about Frank from Denise and had never actually seen him, so Vicky asked her, "He was big? How big was he?" Seemingly lost in a fog of memories, Denise replied hazily, "He was real big, Vicky," her voice trailing off, "real big...about six foot two." Vicki frowned.

"What I'm saying is," Frank said to Denise back then, "and I can't believe you aren't getting this," his voice ramping up, "is that it's all about the writing. The writing. The form. The structure. The word choice. What you bring together, how it is brought in, juxtaposition, interjection, symbol. It is creation itself. And if you can write, I mean if I could write, you know, if I could write like Picasso painted, then wow...that would bring to writing a whole new way of producing art in words. Art in words! You'd use words like you use shapes in painting, brush strokes, light, shadow, color. Revolutionary. It's not a linear story or progression that goes from point A to point B, you know, the traditional beginning-middle-end, but it still has huge meaning - it's abstract, but filled with meaning, possibly rich. Not linear! No. Not that it would be easy. Not just flashbacks and playing with time. Abstract. You get this, Denise? You get it?" Frank's face was full of hope that Denise would grasp the whole idea, maybe even comment on it, and at the same time deep down, or not so deep actually, he knew it was hopeless. It was the third week of their relationship.

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Thank you for reading the samples...