

Raymond Carver's "Submerged Menace" in "Everything Stuck to Him"

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(平成19年9月28日受付；平成19年11月15日受理)

KEY WORDS

Submerged Menace Omission
"Distance" "Everything Stuck to Him"
Implication Leaving out

1

Raymond Carver's second collection of short stories, *Furious Seasons and Other Stories*, includes a story entitled "Distance." This story attracts our attention especially because the story, consisting of merely ten pages, is later cut drastically and made over into a story of no more than six pages long. This shorter version, titled "Everything Stuck to Him," came out in his third collection of stories, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, which "won Carver accolades from Frank Kermode and others as 'a full-grown master' of the storyteller's art" (Bloom, *Raymond Carver* 69).

These two versions are both fairly well-written. The fact that Carver drastically excised several passages from "Distance" shows that he had a rigorous artistic consciousness in terms of the technique of omission. Therefore, it would be interesting to compare these two versions, for, by doing so, we could gain some insight into Carver's craft of short fiction.

It is, however, somewhat perplexing to learn that "Everything Stuck to Him" was once again rewritten, and this version appeared with the story's former title, "Distance," revived, in a later collection of stories and poems, *Fires*. Surprisingly enough, this third version reads much the same as the first version, though dozens of minor changes were made from the first.

It would be next-to impossible to decide which one is the best version out of these three, for the criteria must depend upon the reader's aesthetic sense of fiction, which differs quite often from one to another.

If we examine his rewriting process of these three versions closely, we might possibly discover the keys to Raymond Carver's aesthetic vault of fiction writing. In other words, we can learn what Raymond Carver considered to be necessary requisites for a good story. If we can make clear what went through Raymond Carver's artistic consciousness in the process, then, his technique of writing will come to light.

In this analysis, however, we will focus our attention on the transformation of "Distance" into "Everything Stuck to Him," that is to say, from the first version to the second. We are not going to examine here his rewriting process from the second version to the third, for it will involve other different problems which will have to be dealt with on another occasion.

2

"Distance" is a fairly well-written story about a young couple still in their late teens, with a

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baby daughter between them. Other characters are Carl Sutherland, a friend of the young husband's father, and Claire and Betsy, the young mother's sisters. The latter two persons' names appear only in passing, whereas Carl plays a rather important role in the story.

"Distance," told by a third-person narrator, begins in Milan, Italy, with a young girl who has come there for Christmas to meet her father, and also, perhaps to go sightseeing in the city. The daughter urges him to tell her how his life with her mother was when she was still a baby. Reminiscing the days long gone by, the father begins to tell her about a quarrel that took place between him and his wife. The couple, mentioned in the recollections as the boy and the girl, seems to be leading a happy life together with their baby girl.

In the recollections of the father, the peak of the waterfowl season has started in his part of the country. One Saturday night the boy calls Carl and discusses a plan to go hunting with him early next morning. The girl is quite willing to see her husband off to go hunting while she stays at home with the baby. After they go to bed, the boy wakes to the baby's cries during the night. The time is still only two o'clock in the morning. The couple tries to soothe the crying baby to sleep, and after some efforts, the baby settles down and is put to bed. Soon after the parents fall asleep, the baby again begins to cry and awakes them. They do not know why she does so, nor what to do about it. Before long, the time to leave for hunting approaches and the boy begins to put on clothes. Then the girl protests strongly, saying: "If you want a family you're going to have to choose. If you go out that door you're not coming back, I'm serious" (*Furious Seasons* 33). Being afraid that the baby might have a serious health problem, she wants him to stay with them. Wrenching himself away from wife and baby, he goes to Carl who had been impatiently waiting for him.

Though he has come, the boy tells Carl that "there's something wrong with the baby" and that his wife "keeps crying, I mean. The thing is, I guess I can't go this time" (*Furious Seasons* 34). Carl understands him and lets the boy go back home. The boy drives his car home to find the girl and the baby sleeping soundly in bed. Awaking to the sounds the boy makes, the girl gets up and begins to fix the breakfast. As the boy "start[s] to cut into the waffle he turn[s] the plate into his lap" (*Furious Seasons* 35). The girl bursts into laughter, which induces the boy's laughter, too.

If you could see yourself in the mirror, she said and kept laughing.

He looked down at the syrup that covered the front of his woolen underwear, at the pieces of waffle, bacon and egg that clung to the syrup. He began to laugh.

I was starved, he said, shaking his head.

You were starved, she said, still laughing. (*Furious Seasons* 35-36)

With the bitter mood between them thawing at once, the young couple is reconciled. The recollections of the father end on that happy note, and twenty years after that, the baby girl, now a young lady who has come to Milan to see her father, says to him: "I was interested. It was very interesting, if you want to know. . . . But what happened? Later I mean" (*Furious Seasons* 36). The father shrugs, just saying "things change" (*Furious Seasons* 36), and explains no more. He tells her to be prepared to go out to look around Milan, but he continues to stand at the window, remembering the days gone by.

The story describes an ordinary everyday life of a young couple with nothing special in it, but how happy the boy and the girl are comes across to the reader. At the same time, it makes us understand how the things for the couple have changed since the argument happened. It is understood from reading between the lines that the boy and the girl separated an unspecified

length of time later.

For many years, the young lady must have longed to know how her parents had lived under the same roof and what they had gone through as husband and wife. Because she knows little about their life in the past, she has to urge them to tell her, perhaps separately, whenever possible. This story is rich in implication about the parents' past, but little is revealed to the reader as well as to the girl except this small quarrel which, urged by the girl, the father has told. Furthermore, the diction to describe the relationship is quite simple, and what is told by the narrator is so small a trouble that few writers would hit upon writing about such a trifling thing. The young lady now in Milan is enjoying what her father has told, but, of course, this is not all the father could tell her if he wanted. She has to guess her parents' yet-untold part of their life from what little she has heard from him.

3

"Everything Stuck to Him" appeared in *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, and is much shorter in terms of pages than "Distance," by about 40 percent. The differences are many, but especially remarkable ones are three long deletions from "Distance." The first such deletion is the passage where the relationship between the boy and his father's friend, Carl Sutherland, is explained. This is done in rather detail in "Distance" and is told from the boy's point of view. Their relationship began when the boy's father died and they started hunting together as if "to replace a loss they both felt" (*Furious Seasons* 29).

Once in a while when they were together the boy felt uncomfortable, wondered if he had said or done something wrong because he was not used to being around people who kept still for long periods of time. But when he did talk the older man was often opinionated, and frequently the boy didn't agree with the opinions. Yet the man had a toughness about him and a woods-knowledge that the boy liked and admired. (*Furious Seasons* 29)

Here, the narrator explains rather extensively how the boy felt about Carl. This type of prose style of Raymond Carver's is somewhat different from his famous pared-down prose which he used in *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, but it is not rare in his early period as a writer. The reader gets the impression that the relationship between the boy and Carl is rather important, and that it suggests the boy has worries to deal with other than his life with his family. Because of this, the reader's attention is slightly diverted from the boy and the girl's relationship. "Distance," in this sense, includes two separate conflicts and does not so perfectly induce the reader into appreciating the story.

The second long deletion from "Distance" is the section where emphasis is put on the couple's deep feelings of love toward each other. They express their feelings without restraint:

But who do you really love? The girl asked. Who do you love most in all the world? Who's your wife?

You're my wife, the boy said.

And will we always love each other? the girl asked, enormously enjoying this conversation he could tell.

Always, the boy said. And we'll always be together. (*Furious Seasons* 30)

This conversation exchanged in a sugary voice sounds so sentimental that no serious writer would dare to write it in any story except for a sentimental one. Therefore, the deletion in the second version seems also appropriate.

After this conversation follows an example of a simile in which the Canadian geese are a symbol of genuine love between husband and wife. The boy says: "They only marry once. They choose a mate early in life, and then the two of them stay together always. If one of them dies or something the other one will never remarry" (*Furious Seasons* 30). This simile plays the role of a foreshadowing for their later separation in "Distance." Because the separation is not told openly, the simile of Canadian geese sounds very ironical. In this sense, the topic of the Canadian geese is not completely meaningless and this must be one reason why Carver inserted this episode at an early stage in the story. In "Everything Stuck to Him," however, their true feelings for each other are depicted to a full extent and apparent already, so this episode is not necessary.

The third long passage that was struck out from "Distance" is the scene where the boy informs Carl of his decision not to go hunting with him. This passage is about one-page long and, combined with the first deletion, it accumulates the effect of conflict between the boy and Carl. Carl says: "I'm all ready, just let me hit the lights. I feel like hell, I really do, he went on. I thought maybe you had overslept so I just this minute finished calling your place" (*Furious Seasons* 34). If this scene had survived in "Everything Stuck to Him," the total effect of the story would be much altered. On the contrary, in "Everything Stuck to Him," the boy does not drive his car to see Carl but just sits inside the car outside the boy's house, thinking for some time and finally deciding against going, and returns to the girl, after all. Because of the complete omission of the passage from "Distance," there is no such complicated relationship involved that would interrupt the reader's understanding of the boy and the girl. In this way, Carver's "submerged menace" works better:

... the "literature of subtraction" does not degenerate into a fiction of mere surface and silliness but instead becomes "the literature of multiple levels, multiple threats." Minimalist technique, then, may be a sure sign of submerged menace. (Campbell, *Raymond Carver* 134)

Raymond Carver himself asserts this technique:

The world is a menacing place for many of the people in my stories, yes. The people I've chosen to write about do feel menace, and I think many, if not most, people feel the world is a menacing place.... Menace is there, and it's palpable.... Menace does contain, for me at least, more interesting possibilities to explore. (*Conversations* 102)

4

In "Everything Stuck to Him," besides the three long deletions, there are many alterations, though most of them are minor ones. Roughly, there are three types: Sentimental exchanges; Words that are redundant because implied meanings are almost transparent; Words that are so specific in meaning that the reader's imagination does not work enough. We will see a couple of examples of them.

In "Distance," in the scene where he calls Carl, the boy lets him know that he has a baby girl: "Carl, he said when the man picked up the receiver, I'm a father. We had a baby girl" (*Furious Seasons* 28). A little later, the boy mentions the baby's name: "The baby's fine too. We named her Catherine" (*Furious Seasons* 28). In "Everything Stuck to Him," the conversation goes

like this: "Carl, he said when the man picked up the receiver, believe it or not, I'm a father. / Congratulations, Carl said. How is the wife?" (*What We Talk About* 129).

In this pair of quotations, the boy announces the baby's name to Carl in "Distance," and the boy's feelings are obvious. By contrast, in "Everything Stuck to Him," her name is not mentioned at all and the boy's feelings are subdued. The relationship between the boy and the girl is the sole focus here, and other complications, if any, should be blurred in order to evoke the reader's emotion. Emotion tends to be caused more easily when depiction is less complicated and the conflict is simple and singular. Therefore, in this story, the attempt is successful.

In "Distance," the boy, hanging up the telephone, goes downstairs "to tell the girl he was going hunting the next morning. He was happy about going hunting, and he laid out his things: hunting coat and shell bag, boots, woolen socks, brown canvas hunting cap... / What time will you be back? The girl asked" (*Furious Seasons* 29). In "Everything Stuck to Him," the same scene goes like this: "The boy hung up the telephone and went downstairs to tell the girl. She watched while he laid out his things" (*What We Talk About* 129). The latter, which might read as too simple and objective, is more economical but very evocative of the girl's feelings. Reading that the girl is watching while the boy is making his preparations to go, the reader thinks of the girl's thoughts. In this way, the reader can enjoy reading a good story. In "Distance," however, this enjoyment, though not small, is lessened to some extent as the explanation by the narrator is rather excessive.

A good example of redundancy in "Distance" is this: after some hectic efforts to soothe the baby into sleeping, the boy begins to put on the clothes for hunting. And, when the girl asks him in surprise, "What are you doing?" (*Furious Seasons* 32), the boy answers, "Going hunting" (*Furious Seasons* 32). Then, "I don't think you should, she said. Maybe you could go later on in the day if the baby is all right then, but I don't think you should go this morning. I don't want to be left alone with her like this" (underline mine; *Furious Seasons* 32-33). The underlined sentence has been taken out in "Everything Stuck to Him," and only the skeletal words have remained: "I don't think you should, she said. I don't want to be left alone with her like this" (*What We Talk About* 132). This is simpler, but more evocative of the girl's feelings in this predicament. In a very well-written story, the writer frequently economizes on words and never writes feelings to the full. By doing so he can let the reader's imagination work fully.

Having reconciled, they make a promise to each other not to fight any more. In "Distance," there are sentences that sound sentimental: "When the record ended he kissed her for a long while on the lips. This was about eight o'clock in the morning, a cold Sunday in December" (*Furious Seasons* 36). These sentences are of little use now when evocation of emotion is wanted here. Because the intimate feelings toward each other are already evident between the lines, trying to build emotion through this kind of depiction acts counter to the reader's sense of aesthetics. Therefore, it is quite reasonable that Carver left out these sentences in "Everything Stuck to Him," making the suggestiveness of the couple's affection far more effective.

Finally, at the end of the story, the scene once again switches back to Milan as it first started there at the beginning of the story. Although the father's account of a trivial conflict is almost finished, he still seems to be totally immersed in his thoughts about things that must have happened subsequently in their lives. The young lady, now visiting her father, says: "I was interested. It was very interesting, if you want to know" (*Furious Seasons* 36). The father simply says: "Things change" (*Furious Seasons* 36). And then, the girl responds to it: "Yes, that's true, only,..." (*Furious Seasons* 36) but she does not finish her sentence. It is very evident here that the girl, too, has been immersed in her thoughts about her parents and perhaps, many other things. In the taciturnity of both father and daughter, the reader feels that her parents must

have gone through various ups and downs, good and bad, happy and unhappy, and joyful and painful. The excitement and emotion the reader feels in reading this story chiefly comes from this kind of effect of silence which Raymond Carver called "submerged menace." Without it, this would surely have turned out to be a story that merely tells of an argument the young parents went through about twenty years ago.

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