

Sandra and make them neighbors. You can hear the smack of mallets on the balls along with some conversation about school. But after the first paragraph, Ivan says something nasty about Sandra's mother. Sandra responds not by hitting Ivan's ball with hers but by kicking it. The "game" escalates from there.

As you can see, "Game" isn't a proper story with a beginning, middle, and end. It's a moving picture that becomes a sketch or scene, suggesting something beyond. The term "sketch" is all the more apt when you think of visual art, in which a sketch is the essential lines of a drawing, but not filled in. Here are some guidelines for creating a vignette:

Focus on a moment. If you start to chronicle any substantial period, stop, and instead deepen the presentation of what's already there: waiting half an hour for a date to show up, a missed opportunity to help a stranger.

Develop only as much as you need to register an impression of either a character or an event or even a mood. One trait indicates a sunny personality; a distorted shadow indicates trouble.

Think in psychological terms. Your sketch has a meaning beyond its mere existence because of what it represents: an old woman who can't enjoy a summer afternoon, a boss who won't take no for an answer. Here are five pointers for this kind of treatment:

- 1 Don't merely describe. Follow the action. Dramatize.
- 2 Do more with less. One short scene from a day is plenty.
- 3 Be representative. This part that you're illustrating can stand in for a whole life.
- 4 Go for evocative, concrete details, not abstractions.
- 5 If possible, find a way to give shadows and depth to your sketch.  
Make it mean more than what it seems on the surface.

One of the best practitioners of the vignette is the French author Colette, who wrote searching portraits of love and relationships. Take a look at "The Other Wife," in which Marc is having lunch with his new wife, Alice, at an elegant restaurant when he spots his previous wife at a nearby table. Yet the focus is mainly on the dynamic between Alice

and Marc: he dictates what table they sit at, what they order, and how much weight Alice is putting on. Any author could go on in this vein, but Colette won't. She doesn't need to. She makes her point through gestures, descriptions, and tone. Marc is older than Alice, "his thick hair, threaded here and there with white silk." He dominates, yet nonchalantly, as if always used to getting his way. In which case, who is this woman at the other table, who somehow escaped his grasp? The few details are both alluring and enigmatic: "The woman in white, whose smooth, lustrous hair reflected the light from the sea in azure patches, was smoking a cigarette with her eyes half closed" (translated by Matthew Ward). If this woman, who seems so self-assured, rejected Marc, what does that imply about the prospects for the new marriage? For the first time, Alice entertains doubts about what she's embarked upon. The end is suggestive rather than conclusive: here is a part to suggest the whole. With good vignettes, that's all you need. The complete story is printed in the "Readings."

## EXERCISES

- ❶ Think of yesterday as a sequence of events, then choose a common incident, such as lunch, an hour at work, or a car ride. Now describe it, animate it, and dramatize it so that the reader gets a vivid picture of what's going on, on both an exterior and an interior level. For instance: With a smile, I serve plate after plate of the daily special, spaghetti and meatballs, at Abe's Diner, but I really hate my job. Or: She hitches a ride home with a coworker, a man she'd like to ask out, but she hasn't got the nerve. What incident did you choose, what did it show, and why was it significant? How much of the character did you reveal, and in what ways? Did anything change over the course of the event?
- ❷ Here are some specific directives: What slice of life, the more ordinary, the better, would you use to show envy at the way your parents treat your brother? How good does your friend think she is at driving versus how inept she really is? Why is that man on the curb accosting passersby by asking the same question over and over?