

What Difference Does Writing Make?


Leading Writers on Writing

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Clash

By Matthew Armarfio


A morning chill whipped by, harshly slicing into the rider's face. He inhaled the cool air mingled with salt from the sea and the odour of rotting seaweed. The fiery yellow orb, yet to break through the cloud that clung to the horizon, and yet to warm the morning air.




The clock radio ticked over to 7:00 am, and the morning traffic report abruptly awoke Mandy from her comfortable sleep. Feeling disgruntled and ripped off (surely there must be another three hours until she had to get up?), she rose from her bed, scratched her frizzy hair and stumbled towards the bathroom.



He kept pedalling, his legs ticking over rhythmically without conscious thought; his mind miles away. The congestion of morning traffic had not yet awoken, leaving the road almost bare. He sat up in his saddle and reached down for his bottle. The water was like liquid ice, and he felt the sensation all the way down his throat and into his empty, grumbling stomach. He had left early that morning, still groggy from the night's slumber. Checking the cupboard, he had groaned when the protein bar box was too light. However, the faint crashing of the waves beyond the thick grove of trees which separated the beach from the road and the early morning frost that hung in the air had soon awoken him. His thought of hunger had been driven from his mind until now.




Now sufficiently late (again), Mandy ran with flopping stilettos across her front lawn; keys in one hand, makeup in the other and hastily ate Vegemite toast clenched between her teeth. She landed in the driver's seat, turning the key and praying that the old car would start. Sighing with relief when the dying engine spluttered to life, she reversed out into her street and sped away.




His circuit was almost complete; perhaps there were a few kilometres left. By now, the morning buzz of traffic was beginning to arrive, and he was glad that he could rely on the train network to travel to work.

Mandy decided to take a punt and try Beach Road, hoping that half of the south-eastern suburbs were not thinking the same thing. She applied her mascara and lipstick at the traffic lights, humming to the tunes broadcast from the radio.



Once she had arrived at Beach Road, she had the intention of crossing the left-bound traffic and pulling into the city-bound lane beyond the nature strip. Glancing to the passenger seat to look for her comb, and positive that she hadn't seen any traffic coming from her right, she pulled out.

Mind idling again, his body responded as if second nature to the route home. He did not see the blue sedan abruptly pull out from a side street. In the millisecond of horror that followed, he realised that the young female driver had not seen him. In the next instant he hit the front end of the car with a sickly crunch; the carbon fibre forks of his bike crumpling instantly like tissue paper. Simultaneously, the car's brakes screeched the car to a halt. Propelled over his handlebars and the bonnet of the car, he shot through the air, and landed with a dull thud on the warming asphalt.



Mandy stared in horror as a man in riding tights flew ragdoll like, in an arc over her car and landed on the road, his neck crumpling beneath his body.

“Shit,” she gasped, followed by several ‘effs.

Switching off the car, Mandy climbed out, leaning on the open door and staring at the unmoving body. She felt as if she was in a surreal, weightless vacuum, like a dream, where time slowed and sound came through muffled like underwater. She slowly crept around her car towards the still body of a man, which was lying awkwardly on its front. She looked in shock upon the man’s right side, which was gashed and grazed; blood mingled with flesh and gravel. He didn’t seem to be conscious and there was blood pooling around him.

Sound seemed to return, and time again passed naturally, as Mandy noticed that somebody was yelling and cars were beginning to bank up from the direction where the rider had come from. Her car was in the middle of the road, blocking the view of the bloody man, his bike in a wrecked mess of carbon fibre and aluminium. People looking annoyed and confused began to get out of their cars to try and get a look at what had happened. Mandy realised that the person who was yelling was now standing beside her.

“Oh my god! Is he dead? What happened? Didn’t you see him? Have you called ...?”

Mandy ceased listening, again in a state of limbo.

Somebody must have called emergency services, as the whirring of sirens grew louder. The ambulance arrived first, parking so that the man’s body was enclosed between it and Mandy’s car. Two paramedics piled out, walking almost casually over to the man. They knelt down beside him, one opening a kit, the other speaking. Mandy snapped back to reality, and realised that he was talking to her.

“Were you involved in the accident? Are you OK? Do you know this man?”

Shaking her head, trying to take in his questions, she answered, “Umm, well yes, I ... oh ... umm...yes I’m OK. Umm ... no I don’t know the guy ... oh shit, is he all right?” She was shivering uncontrollably, her words coming in short gasps.

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"We're just checking that," he replied, trying to look into her eyes, which were locked on the other paramedic. "But for now you need to sit down." He guided her to the back of the ambulance.

"You seem to be in shock," he explained. "I need to know if you're OK."

"Yes I'm fine but..."

"OK, the police will be here soon and they will have a talk."

Mandy was extremely shaken when the police arrived a minute later. They first walked over to the paramedics, who looked grim. They then proceeded over to Mandy. One of them was large, in a tight leather jacket. He carried a clipboard and looked to be in his 40s. The other was a young constable.

"I'm Sergeant Miller and this is Constable O'Hern. Were you involved in the accident?"

Mandy nodded, still detached.

"Firstly, I need to inform you that the man involved has in fact died. The medics are..."

But Mandy did not hear another word. It felt like there was vibrations coming from within her chest, her breathing quickened, sweat tingled her brow and she became slightly dizzy. In one instant, one moment of inattention, her world and that of the family of the newest bike victim would be changed for ever. All that she had ever hoped for was now gone, whisked away. She knew she could not be the same. The guilt had yet to sink in; however, she wondered what kind of life the man had had, whether he had family, a wife waiting to see him off to work, or children expecting to be watched at sport. But most of all, she thought about how quickly two lives can be clashed together, for only two minutes, and yet have such far reaching consequences on each other. People around Melbourne would hear this story on the news tonight, and perhaps spare a thought for the poor man, however, they would soon forget; a luxury that was in no way possible for those affected.



Matthew Armarfio wrote this essay in 2006 when he was in Year 11 at Xavier College, Kew, Victoria.