IN A FLASH

By
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I will admit at the outset that it is ironic to address the Chicago Literary Club, a club dedicated to the long form literary essay, about Flash Fiction. Perhaps because of the 24/7 news cycle and the multi-channel contest for our attention, the long form essay, which explores in depth a topic of intellectual interest, seems to be dying, its practice limited to academia and upscale periodicals such as *The New Yorker* and the *Atlantic*, and literary clubs such as ours.

There's little doubt that prose works of all kinds are getting shorter. Will there come a time when we will gather to hear five or ten essays a night? Have we changed as readers? What can a writer convey in a short work, and what can the writer of long form pieces learn from the techniques of Flash Fiction? And even though it may seem "old school" to do so, can we hear an example or two of Flash Fiction, perhaps written by a member of our own Club? And, in keeping with our topic tonight, can we do this in as few words as possible? How about an essay of only half the usual 5200 words we cram into a 40-minute talk, and another 2200 words of Flash?

Telling stories has been essential to all societies, if only to record tribal history or pass on information important to individual or communal health. One might think of the ancients' hieroglyphics and other pictograms as the shortest of stories, conveying basic information in a simple representative sketch, requiring some deciphering by the reader. Over time stories became spoken, perhaps at first grunted or chanted. There were usually told in the first person.

Perhaps for ease of memorization, they were rhythmic and repetitive--and later, even after print was available (at least to the privileged)--sometimes sung, like the freedom spirituals that guided American slaves to the North via the Underground Railroad.

So, we have always had stories and short stories of one kind or another. Even the Bible, one of the most read books of all time, is a collection of rather short pieces. What we are discussing today is not altogether modern, Flash being akin to the parables of Jesus rather than the longer epistles of Peter and Paul.

Someplace along the way, stories got longer and more complicated. Some say the world's first novel was written in 1012 by a Japanese woman, Murasaki Shikibu. Titled *The Tale of Genji*, it tells the story of a prince looking for love and wisdom, and in its most recent English translation, is 1300 pages. There is some dispute over the appearance of the first novel in the English language, depending on how "novel" is defined and whether it includes novellas, allegories, connected episodes (such as in the picaresque), romances containing fantastic elements, or other long works dating back to 1470. There is, however, general acceptance of Ian Watt's designation of Daniel DeFoe's 1719 *Robinson Crusoe*, approximately 400 modern pages, as the first English language novel. William Hill Brown's 1789 sentimental and epistolary *The Power of Sympathy, or The Triumph of Nature,* is generally considered the first American novel. It was 328 pages.

The first popular American story collection is thought to be Washington Irving's *The Sketchbook of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent*., published in 1820 when Irving was using the Geoffrey Crayon pseudonym. *The Sketchbook*, containing his best-known stories, "Rip Van Winkle" (9300 words) and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," (8000 words) began a trend towards shorter

pieces of fiction. In “Rip Van Winkle,” Irving condensed time, a marker of today’s Flash. Irving also focused on what we now call “slice of life” stories about average people.

In the 1800’s periodicals offered generous payments to writers, and Edgar Allen Poe sustained himself on his short stories, which broke with the tradition of seeking story through plot or character and instead focused on capturing a mood or feeling. Other19th century big names counted among the harbingers of the short-short story are Guy de Maupassant, Anton Chekov, Rudyard Kipling, Franz Kafka and Charles Baudelaire.

O’Henry published a weekly story in *New York World* from 1903 to 1906, for a total of 600 stories in his lifetime. His most well-known shorts, “The Gift of the Magi” and “The Last Leaf,” were 1800 and 2400 words, respectively. O’Henry’s innovation was the surprise ending or “twist.”

The first US writer to shape an entire collection of what have been called vignettes, sketches or “interchapters” was Ernest Hemingway, who wrote *In Our Time,* in his mid-twenties, in France. It consisted of 32 pages and 18 numbered short shorts, some just half a page.

The first time the label “short-short” story was officially used was in 1926 in *Collier’s Weekly*. But *Liberty Magazine* had already been publishing stores that were identified by reading times, such as “4 minutes, 30 seconds.” At an average of, say, 225 words per minute, that’s about 1000 words. Around this time a short story was thought to run from 10 to 20,000 words.

In the middle of the 20th century, periodicals, which had been the primary market for short stories and short-shorts, began to lose their audiences to television. Fewer and fewer magazines could pay writers for their stories, leaving the glossies like *The New Yorker* and *Harpers* to publish the literary and experimental ones. Still, writers like W.S. Merwin, Donald

Barthelme, Jorge Luis Borges, Raymond Carver and Richard Brautigan continued to find a place. Today, *The New Yorker* annually publishes a number of pieces it labels "Flash Fiction."

In the eighties, the short-short reemerged. In 1982, Irving and Ilana Howe edited *Short Stories: An Anthology of the Shortest Stories,* including stories up to 2500 words, long by today's Flash standards. The Howe's included stories by Tolstoy, Chekhov, Kafka, Borges, Maupassant, Sherwood Anderson and more, and introduced the collection with this description of the genre: "It is fiercely condensed, almost like a lyric poem; it explodes itself to a single, overpowering incident, it bears symbolic weight."[1] Ten years later, in a volume entitled *Flash Fiction: 72 Very Short Stories*[2] John Thomas coined the word "Flash" to describe stories of 250 to 750 words. He included works by Joyce Carol Oates, Margaret Atwood and John Updike.

Today, Flash Fiction goes by many names: micro, quick, fast, furious, napkin, sudden, postcard, short-short, skinny stories, dribbles. Its length ranges from 140 characters (the original Tweet) up to a maximum of 1500 words. Sudden is often capped at 750 words; Micro at 100, Twitterature at 280 characters (between 40 and 70 words). And the six-word story, attributed by unsubstantiated legend to Hemingway--"For Sale. Baby Shoes. Never Worn." -- is its own sub-genre.

It has been observed that what television took away—the market for and interest in short stories—technology has brought back, developing an expanding readership interested in brief styles. One proponent of the Flash genre reported that in 2018 a Google search for "Flash

[1] Tara Marsh, Ed., Field *Guide to Writing Flash Fiction, (*Brookline: Rose Metal Press, 2009) XXXV.
[2] Marsh, *Field Guide,* XXXVI.

Fiction markets" yielded 719,000 hits, while Duotrope, a resource for writers, listed 4700 markets—print and online—looking for Flash Fiction.[3]

Some worry that we are moving away from words altogether. A glaring example is the reemergence of the pictogram—the emoji—although I dare say the Egyptian hieroglyphics were more precise in their meaning than the various facial expressions available on my phone. Even the *Wall Street Journal* reported last summer that a smiley emoji now means something different to people over 30 than it does to younger users, who see it as "patronizing or passive-aggressive."[4]

Is it true our attention spans are shorter? In 2015 *Time* magazine reported that a study from Microsoft Corp. found that the average attention span had dropped from 12 seconds to 8, less than the attention span for the skittish goldfish. The story reporting this news was 206 words.[5]

A longer story from the *BBC World Service* debunked the supposed study, which was not in fact conducted by Microsoft but came from a cited source which the BBC couldn't track down. The BBC also questioned the disparaging statistics about the ability of the goldfish to focus.[6] In truth, our average attention span depends on age, task, individual abilities, distractions and a host of other factors.

Some actual evidence of our shortening attention spans might be found in the shrinking of TV commercials. In 2009, 35 percent of TV ads were 15-second units rather than the standard

[3] John Dufresne, *Flash! Writing the Very Short Story,* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2018) xii.
[4]Aiyana Ishmael, "Sending Smiley Emojis? They Mean Different Things to Different People," *The Wall Street Journal,* September 8, 2021.
[5] Kevin McSpadden, "You Now Have a Shorter Attention Span Than a Goldfish," Time *Magazine*, May 14, 2015.
[6] Simon Maybin, "Busting the attention span myth," BBC *World Service, More or Less*. March 10, 2017.

30, then considered the "ideal." By 2013 the number had climbed to 44 percent, and today 15 seconds is considered the standard.

What is so special about Flash Fiction? John Dufresne, whose *2018 Flash! Writing the Very Short Story* is one of the few texts on the subject, says that writing Flash Fiction is the art of omission, that it is fiction approaching haiku, the art of few words and many suggestions. It's compact, concentrated and compressed. But it is not just a pared-down story. It has a beginning, a middle and an end. Its focus isn't necessarily plot or characters, though it should still have both. Instead, the emphasis may be placed on movement, each sentence peeling back a new layer that wasn't visible at first. Chicago writing coach Fred Shafer calls this "maximum compression," an economy achieved through careful selection of singular details.

Chicago's own Stuart Dybek, a master of the genre, notes that Flash Fiction derives from what used to be called "prose poems." He says, "Flash Fictions have a narrative quality that make them different from classical prose poems; at the same time, they tend to have a strong lyric element that aligns with poetry."[7] For Dybek,

> Poetry is basic to human beings…but there's the sense at this moment that most people get it from other genres—popular song, hip-hop, rap. *** In fiction, though, the poetic impulse is usually relegated to the end of the story…. *** …usually because something big has happened that generates and justifies the gear change—poetry is warranted in these moments of extreme emotion….[8]

Editor Kim Chinquee provides a list of key attributes of truly great Flash Fiction: "Language. Imagery. Surprise. Things that are left out. Elements such as tone and point of view can fill in for the plot. Rhythm. And a smashing title and ending."

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[7] Joe Fassler, "The Surprising Power of Stories That Are Shorter Than Short Stories," *The Atlantic*, June 11, 2014. https:www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2014/06/the-enormous-power-of-extremely-short-stories/372570

[8] Id.

Flash Fiction is emotional. "The Queen died and then the King died" is anecdote, lacking both causation and emotion. "The Queen died and then the King died of grief," is story: it offers causation, although as a short-short it fails to evoke deep emotion in the reader because it lacks searing detail. In the short-short, the emotion is often generated by the rhythm of the sentences, the *unfamiliar* sensory detail, and an element of surprise.

One of Dufresne's most interesting concepts about Flash Fiction is that it is like Zen: "[I]t doesn't explain; it only indicates."[9] Dybek also sees Flash Fiction as akin to haiku. He says that in the West, haiku has lost "a quality that translates, roughly, to 'double vision.' It's a way of talking about a certain form of juxtaposition. ***two images, two ideas, are layered upon one [another] simultaneously—and both are enhanced by the comparison.[10]"

This kind of writing is an advanced form of collaboration with the reader. The story, Dufresne says, is "the call that awaits its response." He says:

> You begin the story or the scene, *you furnish clues*, sunlight through an open window, say, a woman leaning out, her elbows on the sill, watching the surf pound the beach, and *the reader sees* the wisp of hair falling over her eye, smells the salt air, hears the sizzle of the surf and the barking of that golden retriever dancing in the waves." (Italics mine)[11]

This is not unlike our brain's ability to read without vowels, as in many of the 'Can you read this" quizzes which periodically float around the internet. According to some neuroscientists, our brains use context to pre-activate the areas of our brains that correspond to what we expect next. So we can read a string of constants based on our expectations, which is why, in a way, we

[9] Dufresne, *Flash!,* 1.
[10] Fassler, "The Surprising Power…"
[11] Dufresne, *Flash!,* xiii.

can see the surf and add that dog to Dufresne's scene, and why characters from our Flash Fiction live on, with only the suggestion of an ending.

How many times have you watched a Law and Order rerun with no idea of the ending? Because it in fact ended with a defined outcome the first time you saw it and your mind moved on. Flash Fiction—and any good literary story—suggests a story that lives on. It stays with us. Dufresne puts it this way: "It deepens the creative collaboration between author and reader."[12]

While Flash Fiction may be quickly read, it is not often quickly written. Henry David Thoreau wrote, "Not that the story need be long, it will take a long while to make it short." Or, as Friedrich Nietzsche put it, "It is my ambition to say in ten sentences what others say in a whole book." To attain this level of compression, the writer must learn to look, listen, and notice, all intensely.

Why this urge to write less? I think it is the discipline required to choose the right word to convey as closely as possible the writer's exact perception, meaning, emotion, or attitude. In writing fiction, and, I suggest, nonfiction as well, it may be impossible to convey the depth and nuance of, say, "happiness" without scene, gestures or sensory details. The reader will discover his/her own "happiness" in the particularity of those details—especially the singular, perfect detail. One perfect detail can do what dozens may not: create a meaningful dialogue with the reader.

In his powerfully written, *A Swim in a Pond in the Rain*, George Saunders suggests that the writer's version of a story and his/her word choice appeal to the version of the reader that is

[12] Dufresne, *Flash!,* 9.

most like the version of the writer he/she presents to the reader. When the reader reads a phrase the writer has written, he asks, "Are you in or out? With me or against me? … By that little tussle, you know I'm here. And I know you're there."[13] It is, Saunders says, a point of connection.

The long form essay also seeks to connect to readers, and the techniques of Flash Fiction--economy of words, lyrical detail and the rhythm of emotion--can be employed to increase the effectiveness of the essay. The structure of the expository essay requires understanding the reader's logic, providing the information they need to understand the essay's thesis and anticipating the order in which they need to know it. By employing the techniques of Flash, making sure each word carries weight and every image or metaphor does double duty, the essay writer may better connect to the reader not just on the intellectual level, but the emotional one as well. The use of lyrical language in narrative and even expository prose will, according to Dybek, "create the possibility for formal and emotional surprise."[14] Surprise and the unexpected are pleasurable to the reader.

The best long form essays will, in my opinion, not only make a convincing argument for their theses, but will be girded by language, rhythm and images which make an emotional appeal, however subtle. The long form essay is not merely an intellectual exercise in a meeting of the minds, but an opportunity for connection, for the reader's participation in the underlying emotion of the piece. It may be that sometimes the underlying emotion is curiosity, wonder or

[13] George Saunders, *A Swim in a Pond in the Rain*. (New York: Random House, 2021) 389.
[14] Fassler, "The Surprising Power…"

surprise at the world, and in sharing his or her enthusiasm, the writer creates that opportunity for connection.

And so I must conclude that neither the long form essay nor Flash Fiction is a "flash in the pan." Both have the power to connect us, and as long as our Club promotes connections, it should have a bright future.

Now I would like to share four Flash pieces of my own.

The first is long, at 933 words; the second, 810; the third, 495, and the last, just 6.

THIS IS THE STORY I WAS GIVEN TODAY

(This story will be published in 2022 by Drunk Monkeys)

As my best friend Jeannie and I were leaving our Weight Watchers meeting at a downtown hotel, I glimpsed a woman close behind me who hadn't been at our meeting. She was wearing a natural straw fedora with a black grosgrain band. Jeannie and I had reached our "turning sixty" goals and were heading towards celebratory blueberry pancakes. Just before we got to the corner, the woman in the hat caught up with us.

"Pardon me," she said in a British accent. "May I ask where you got that skirt? I like the way it flares. Perfect for walking."

"At the Good Will," I smiled. Recently I had abandoned Nieman's for resale shops, not out of any immediate economic necessity but instead a pre-retirement curiosity about the financial implications of not working.

As soon as I'd confessed, I panicked. "Why, is it yours?"

"No, no. Not mine," she laughed. "Although, my daughter once bought me the Deathbed Edition of *Leaves of Grass* at a book shop where I had put it on consignment. Nothing against Whitman mind you, but there was absolutely not another square millimeter in the library. I'd had a lottery to cull my collection. Took me quite a while to set the thing up. Walt lost."

A family of tourists approached, and we moved closer to the building to let them pass. "Of course, I gave my daughter fifty per cent of the price the shop gave me. We had quite a good one over that."

“Paula’s a writer,” Jeannie said proudly. I cringed good-naturedly at a title I wasn’t sure I deserved, but desperately wanted. I’d only had two stories published, both in obscure journals. Imagining the woman was a literary agent—from Britain —I prepared to deliver my “pitch” and be discovered.

The improbable career-making question never came. “Ah, yes. I should write my memoirs,” she said, and introduced herself as Caroline. She touched the corner of her eye. “I’ve always wanted to write. About my father and my grandfather.”

Ever since I started writing fiction a few years ago, I’ve believed that the world gives us the stories we are to write, if we are open to them, so I overlooked the fact that the woman’s memoirs were not to be about her but about her father. “What makes him interesting?” I asked.

“Who?” she replied.

“Your father?”

Her blue eyes flashed. “Oh,” she said, rapidly describing her grandfather’s military service in Constantinople and Petrograd, her father’s education in London, his recruitment to the M16, his testimony at Nuremburg, his sending her to Oxford, the time she saw JFK in Paris, perched on his shoulders.

“You really should write all that down,” Jeannie said, which I hoped would extricate us from Caroline’s ramblings. “At least for your family.”

“No, no. My father wrote his own memoirs years ago,” she said.

Ahead of us, the walk light changed. “Nice to meet you,” I said. “Enjoy your stay.” She left us at the corner with a royal wave, and—I’m not making this up—a bright “Cheerio!”

“Well, there’s a story for you,” Jeannie said.

"Apparently, it's been done," I said. "Besides, it's not a story. Anecdotes. Nothing connecting them, except her."

"You could make up a plot," Jeannie said.

My stomach growled. "Not my strong suit," I said, feeling a bit defensive over a rejection I'd received just that week. "Editors seem to want over-the-top plots."

"Everyone loves action and heroes," Jeannie said.

I felt stabbed. "So you don't really like my stories?" Could it be that all this time she'd been lying to me?

"Of course I like them," Jeannie said.

"No, you don't. My action is mostly internal, too quiet."

"Well, I like them anyway. They're interesting."

"Interesting" was not my idea of an enthusiastic compliment. Newly horrified, I mocked, "Even if nothing happens?"

"I don't know," she said, and pointed to the traffic light. "I'm not the one who wants to be a writer." *Wants to be.*

We missed another commandment to "walk." My feelings were hurt, and I didn't care whether we got to breakfast or not.

"I'm not a writer," she said. "All I know is what I like, and I like your stuff." Helplessly, she added, "When I understand it."

"And how often is that?" I demanded.

She spoke softly, as if to calm a petulant child. "I understand there are different kinds of stories—the ones we tell ourselves to make sense of our lives, and the ones we tell others so they can make sense of us."

"And *I* understand," I said, indignant, "that I might hear a different story than the one you tell."

"Pardon me." A gray-haired man appeared in the space between us, like a referee. He had a crisp British accent, leaned on a silver-topped ebony cane, and was dressed in a navy suit with a starched white shirt and a red and gold club tie. An array of cheap medals, like the ones awarded to high school debaters, hung haphazardly on the left side of his suit jacket.

"Have you seen a woman in a hat pass by here?" Jeannie and I looked at each other. "Gray hair? Short sleeved red jacket. This tall?" he raised his hand even with my nose. "Perhaps a wee bit, shall we say, 'disoriented'?"

"Oh, are you her father?" Jeannie squealed. "We met Caroline a few minutes ago, headed that way. What an amazing life you've had. She told us your story."

The old man pursed his lips and shook his head slowly. "Yes. She does make it interesting."

PARADISE LOST

It was dazzling. Brilliant. Incandescent. Like a geyser, the blaze hungrily consumed his home, yet he stood in his yard in the thoughtful pose of the museum-goer, pondering the great furnace flaming in front of him.

He stood in his best but worn tweed jacket and a stained white turtleneck, mesmerized, confounded, helpless: How had it started? Why his house? Why him?

Things had not been going his way lately, but he'd done what he could to avoid this sort of catastrophe. When he got stopped a few months ago for being the slightest bit over the center line while on his way back from his favorite bar, he'd been grateful for the warning the police officer--his former student--had given him, and he'd stopped going to any bar not within walking distance from his home. And he hadn't even been out to one of those since the night he stumbled in front of his neighbor's, striking his head and not coming to until the next morning when the man had come out for his paper and found him spread-eagled under a newly planted maple. It had been embarrassing--indignantly, he'd reported the crack in the sidewalk to the city administrator, but nothing was done. To appease his doctor--unduly alarmed by slightly high liver readings of some kind--he'd gone off scotch for a whole month, even though the port he sipped after dinner gave him headaches.

His cat rubbed between his ankles, startling him from his reverie. "Oh," he moaned, "poor kitty. Thank goodness you made it." No one was there to see how shocked he was at himself not to have thought earlier of the cat, his pet of eight years. He looked at his watch, trying to recollect the events of the evening.

He must've fallen asleep in his favorite recliner. He'd been reading Milton, a fine single malt in a stubby glass on the end table, the half-empty bottle poised nearby. The power of the language had overwhelmed him. He'd wiped a tear from his eye for its beauty, for the paradise lost. Now, he recalled the "whirlwinds of tempestuous fire" and felt the situation before him dismal, undeserved. He understood Milton's purpose: Why would a God do these things to a peaceful soul like himself?

He was a lover of the English language, had once taught Milton to University students and though he was now saddled with a survey course for ungrateful freshmen at the community college, he did his best: he was never more than ten or fifteen minutes late for class, and this year he'd written an entire new lecture on the literature of the nineties, such as it was. Accepting such inferior employment had cost him, too; his wife couldn't stand the town and had left him, sometime last semester. He'd found himself alone, cooking for himself and doing his own laundry, but free to come and go as he pleased and to enjoy a fine scotch without her constant recriminations. She'd never understood him.

A voice behind him called, "Professor! Mr. Bracken! Are you okay?" He turned to see his neighbor, one of those early-to-bed types, running towards him, cellphone pressed against his ear. Barefoot, the man approached, bathrobe open to reveal his plaid boxer shorts.

"I'm okay," the Professor called, waving the man away. His glass of scotch went flying, shattering on the sidewalk and shocking him; he hadn't realized he'd brought it with him. He hoped the neighbor wouldn't draw the wrong conclusion.

The neighbor shook his head. "I called the fire department," he said.

"I don't know how this happened!" the Professor said.

"*You* didn't call," the neighbor said, demanding an answer. "Why didn't you call?"

“It must’ve started in the basement. Margaret stored her oil paints there. Too near the furnace perhaps? Or I suppose it could’ve been the cat.”

“What’s the difference?” the neighbor cried. “Your house is burning.”

He licked his parched lips, the thought of lost happiness and lasting pain tormenting him. He wished he hadn't dropped the scotch. “I was going to change her litter box, but I lit one of those scented candles instead. She must’ve knocked it over.”

“For godsakes, the whole neighborhood could’ve gone up in flames.”

Sirens shrieked and a dozen men in black rubber gear unhooked hoses and hurried to their posts. “Don’t be an alarmist, my dear man.”

“Anyone inside?” a firefighter called.

The Professor reached down to stroke his cat.

“No,” the neighbor answered in disgust. “Just this fool.”

The Professor looked at his neighbor and remembered again that he could sorely use a drink. Inspired by the thought, he intoned, as if for his own amusement, “All is not lost,” and turned towards the bar down the street, where he might find an understanding soul, someone who could justify the ways of God.

RELOCATION

(This story will be published in a few months by The Bangalore Review)

There were chimpanzees in our back yard.

Oops, I did it again. Chipmunks. A dozen of them, constantly scurrying across the lawn from the sparse patch underneath the birdfeeder to a crack in the cement steps leading up to our porch. We had one cutie there last year; now there's an extended family—first cousins, second cousins--all of them taking turns digging in my potted plants.

We used to go to our cottage in the country only on weekends. When COVID hit, we were already retired, and so we spent most of our time there. (The city was pretty much shut down.)

The busy little critters were fun to watch, but they had become destructive. A neighbor loaned my husband Bill a "Havaheart," a humane live-animal trap. In the middle of the contraption, there's a dish for a pile of peanut butter. A chipmunk steps on the dish to get to the delicacy and the door slams shut behind him. It took fewer than ten minutes to get the first one.

I could barely look. "Now what?"

"I'll take him a couple miles away and let him go," Bill said.

"That's awful," I cried. "What about his buddies?"

"We'll get them later," he said.

"Poor little guy must be scared to death," I said, willing at that moment to forgive every transgression of every flowering pot on my porch.

"Does he look scared?" Bill asked. He pointed to his catch, nibbling as fast as he could at the peanut brittle. Sorry, peanut butter. His cheeks bulged.

"Let him go. Don't separate him from his friends."

"That's ridiculous," Bill said. I stomped back into the house, my stomach churning.

Fifteen minutes later, Bill reported, "They're at the Ritz." He'd found an abandoned home site with an old stone silo, some high grass and a row of dense bushes.

The next capture followed within minutes, and then another an hour later. At my insistence, Bill took them all to the same spot—he had me go with him so I'd know for sure. The next day, another four of the clan went to the Waldorf, a new site Bill found a mile away from the Ritz.

We had a couple little guys left but they stayed away from our porch. That could be my wishful imagination, which, I will admit, has been playing tricks on me lately. I ask Bill what he wants for golf when I mean dinner; say I am going to the boat when I mean the store. I would worry, but Bill says I just need to pay more attention. But I do note a look of sad concern.

So then today Bill said he thought we ought to terminate our lease in the city and move to the country full time. Bill says we're doing it now because of the virus. I am not ready for relocation, but Bill says it's a progressive disease.

Again, I know how the chimpanzees feel.

I will close with the shortest story I've even written. It is entitled, "Gratitude":

GRATITUDE

She spoke.

They listened.

She's grateful.

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