

- Half a package of sinus medicine tablets
- \$2 in quarters, taped together
- Receipt for 20 gallons of Chevron Supreme, paid with American Express Platinum card
- Mickey Mouse Pez dispenser

Character C

- Expensive sunglasses
- Book: *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*
- Fine-tipped pen
- Cell phone
- Discount coupon for Jiffy Lube
- Torn half of a movie ticket for a porno movie
- Program for an art gallery opening

Exercise 2: Sins of Commission, Sins of Omission

GOAL: To learn more about your character by (a) finding out what "sins" he or she has committed, while simultaneously (b) discovering what he or she thinks is a sin.

1. Choose a character, and fix him or her in your mind.
2. Write down two lists: one of the sins of omission (the things the character didn't do) and one of the sins of commission (what the character *did* do) that are on his or her conscience.

The following passage was written by James Hanafec:

Sins of Omission

- Didn't acknowledge distress in sister's voice when I called her last Sunday. Pretended the dog was peeing on the carpet and that I needed to hang up when it seemed as though she was about to say something serious.
- Didn't smile at my son when he showed me the family portrait he'd drawn because my bald spot was so prominently displayed.
- Didn't thank wife for making dinner even though it was my turn to cook because no one else has a "meal schedule" posted on their refrigerator.
- Didn't cancel the brunch reservations for twelve people at Emilio's, even though we had decided not to go a week previously.
- Didn't clean the dead insects out of the kids' pool before daughter swam.

Sins of Commission

- Left the Sunday *New York Times* in disarray even though my husband hadn't read it yet.

Exercise 1: Emptying Pockets

GOAL: To learn about your character by writing down all the things that can be found on his or her person.

1. Choose a character, and fix him or her in your mind.
2. Write a list of the things that can be found in his or her pockets, purse, or backpack (you choose).
3. Make sure there is at least one surprising but convincing item found. *Note:* No clichés like guns, drugs, or condoms, please.

Here are some examples of how you might complete this exercise:

Character A

- Walgreen's brand "Naturally Neutral" lipstick, half gone
- Solar calculator
- Mini screwdriver, Phillips head on one end, slot-edged on the other
- Crumpled shopping list containing the words "eggs," "nonfat milk," "Superglue"
- Three ATM slips, each showing \$20 cash withdrawals, three consecutive days
- Roll of Fresh Mint Cets, unopened
- Fortune from Chinese fortune cookie that reads "Keep those dangerous plans secret for now"

Character B

- Torn stub from movie theater ticket to *Die Hard VII*
- Reporter's notebook, half-filled with notes on data warehouse design using Oracle 7.0
- Pilot pen, extra fine, black ink, tightly capped
- A dozen keys attached to industrial chain with metal hook

- Speeded up and refused to let elderly man merge into my lane on 101, even though he was signaling correctly.
- Put together the broken TV remote control in such a way that the next person who picked it up would think they broke it.
- Threw away neighbor's mail that was put in our mailbox by accident.
- Ate a handful of red flame seedless grapes while shopping at Whole Foods without paying for them.
- Made sarcastic comments throughout the broadcast of the season finale of *Star Trek Voyager*, even though it was the highlight of retired father's week.

Exercise 3: Seven or Eight Things I Know about Him/Her

GOAL: To "slant" at a character by coming up with small, odd details from his or her life.

1. Read "7 or 8 Things I Know about Her" by Michael Ondaatje (below).
2. Fix a character in your mind.
3. Write seven or eight brief "facts" about that character, his or her family, his or her surroundings—but try to avoid the sorts of things that you would include in a traditional biography. You can parallel the headings found in the original prose poem, if you like.

MICHAEL ONDAATJE

7 or 8 Things I Know about Her—A Stolen Biography

The Father's Guns

After her father died they found nine guns in the house. Two in his clothing drawers, one under the bed, one in the glove compartment of the car, etc. Her brother took their mother out onto the prairie with a revolver and taught her to shoot.

The Bird

For a while in Topeka parrots were very popular. Her father was given one in lieu of a payment and kept it with him at all times because it was the fashion. It swung above him in the law office and drove back with him in the car at night. At parties friends would bring their parrots and make them perform what they had been taught: the first line from *Tweeth Night*, a bit of Italian opera, cowboy songs, or a surprisingly good rendition of Russ Colombo singing "Prisoner of Love." Her father's parrot could only imitate the office typewriter, along with the *cling* at the end of each line. Later it broke its neck crashing into a bookcase.

The Bread

Four miles out of Topeka on the highway—the largest electric billboard in the state of Kansas. The envy of all Missouri. It advertised bread and the electrical innards of a

knife cut slice after slice. These curled off endlessly. "Meet you at the bread," "See you at the loaf," were common phrases. Aroused couples would park there under the stars on the open night prairie. Virtue was lost, "Kissed all over by every boy in Wichita." Poets, the inevitable visiting writers, were taken to see it, and it hummed over the seductions in cars, over the nightmares of girls in bed. Slice after slice fell towards the earth. A feeding of the multitude in this parched land on the way to Dorance, Kansas.

First Criticism

She is two weeks old, her mother takes her for a drive. At the gas station the mechanic is cleaning the windshield and watches them through the glass. Wiping his hands he puts his head in the side window and says, "Excuse me for saying this but I know what I'm talking about—that child has a heart condition."

Listening In

Overhear her in the bathroom, talking to a bug. "I don't want you on me, honey." 8 a.m.

Self-Criticism

"For a while there was something about me that had a dubious quality. Dogs would not take meat out of my hand. The town bully kept handcuffing me to trees."

Fantasies

Always one fantasy. To be traveling down the street and a man in a clean white suit (the detail of "clean" impresses me) leaps into her path holding flowers and sings to her while an invisible orchestra accompanies his solo. All her life she has waited for this, and it never happens.

Reprise

In 1996 the electric billboard in Kansas caught fire and smoke plumed into a wild sunset. Bread on fire, broken glass. Birds flew towards it above the cars that circled round to watch. And last night, past midnight, her excited phone call. Her hometown is having a marathon to benefit the symphony. She pays \$4 to participate. A fixated gentleman begins the race with a clash of cymbals and she takes off. Along the route at frequent intervals are quartets who play for her. When they stop for water a violinist performs a solo. So here she comes. And there I go, stepping forward in my white suit, with a song in my heart.

The following was written by Jenna Philpott:

Her Mother's Cans

After she died, they found, in the basement of her mother's house, thousands of cans, carefully stripped of their paper labels and washed and dried, stacked neatly in shining towers up to six feet high.

The Cat

Since all the other members of her family were extremely allergic to animal fur, the only pet she could have as a child was a turtle. The turtles kept dying but since they all looked alike her parents secretly replaced them in the middle of the night so she had a single, long-aged turtle from the age of seven to seventeen, when she left for school.

The Bridge

There was a bridge that led over a small inlet of the Bay, and a coming-of-age ritual for all graduating seniors in high school was to jump off the bridge en masse the day before graduation day. It was a town event; the bridge was unofficially closed off (strangers who came by were politely asked to wait or go around the peninsula) and everyone stood on the banks of the inlet to cheer them on. She was horribly frightened, and if someone hadn't pushed her off she would not have had the nerve to do it.

First Criticism

Her father, watching her playing with a small stuffed rabbit, holding it up to her face and rubbing it against it and laughing, said, "That child is going to be terribly lonely."

Listening In

"Are you nuts, you?" overheard in the car as she looked at herself in the rearview mirror.

Self-Criticism

"When I was young I didn't know how to dance. All the other children loved to jump up and down to the music, but I didn't know how, so I always hid behind my parents until the music stopped. I learned to hate music early and associate it with humiliation."

Fantasies

Just one fantasy: To walk into a classroom on the day of an examination and to sit down calmly, and in control and know that she will excel.