

our "house," a geodesic dome, herbal tea, and books we all talked about. Cynthia and I were stunned and amused. We knew it was time to escape this small town when we found ourselves turning up in strangers' dreams. This stranger was creating two fictional characters out of our own limited history that she knew—through other friends, probably students of mine, and a reading I'd given at the restaurant a few months before.

We observe strangers going about their lives, and we fill in the details that seem to be missing, supplying character for ciphers, extrapolating from a few key images, words, or gestures. We yearn to make sense of the chaos around us, even if the sense we make of it is wrong. We will nearly always assume a great deal about someone we're meeting for the first time—building a shorthand narrative of him that may or may not be accurate, but this first impression lives on long after a fuller picture of the person forms. In this exercise, there will be two competing ideas of how people are made up—remember that. Give your two creators power, but the power does not need to be evenly distributed. You might learn from this exercise how commonly we create other people with our own words. Human beings exist in the world in some kind of concrete way, but they also exist in other people's minds and stories. These are often two different versions of the same person, and we are probably many contradictory and distinct characters to our friends and casual acquaintances.

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CHARACTER BUILDING. Write a story in which, during several conversations, two people create a fictional character. You can have them argue about the character; you can have them in harmonious agreement. The character need not be at the center of the story, but he should be involved in the plot.

400 words

THIS IS A FAR MORE COMMON game than you might think—and it offers you the opportunity to do something with dialogue that is an essential part of our behavior—gossip. We tell stories about other people all the time. What you'll do here is turn this powerful urge to gossip into a creative act.

When my wife, Cynthia, and I were moving away from Athens, Ohio, after having lived there two years, we had one last dinner at a favorite restaurant. We didn't know the waitress, but when she discovered we were leaving town, she became upset. She told us she'd had several dreams about us, involving