

When an unspoken subject remains unspoken, tension continues to build in a story. Often the crisis of a story occurs when the unspoken tension comes to the surface and an explosion results. “If you’re trying to build pressure, don’t take the lid off the pot,” Jerome Stern suggests in his book *Making Shapely Fiction*. “Once people are really candid, once the unstated becomes stated, the tension is released and the effect is cathartic. . . . [Y]ou want to give yourself the space for a major scene. Here you do want to describe setting and action vividly, and render what they say fully. You’ve taken the lid off the pot and we want to feel the dialogue boil over.”

**I**F YOU TAKE TWO STICKS AND HOLD THEM PARALLEL, you can capture that image in a photograph because it doesn’t change. But if you rub those two sticks together, harder and harder, faster and faster, they will burst into flame—that’s the kind of change you can capture in a story or on film. Friction is necessary for change to occur. But without the friction of conflict, there is no change. And without change, there is no story. A body at rest remains at rest unless it enters into conflict.

STEPHEN FISCHER

**“No” Dialogue.** The previous Munro passage (page 75) also illustrates an essential element of conflict in dialogue: Tension and drama are heightened when characters are constantly (in one form or another) saying no to each other. In the following exchange from Ernest Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea*, the old man feels only love for his young protégé, and

their conversation is a pledge of affection. Nevertheless, it is the old man’s steady denial that lends the scene tension.

“Can I go out and get sardines for you tomorrow?”

“No. Go and play baseball. I can still row and Rogelio will throw the net.”

“I would like to go. If I cannot fish with you, I would like to serve in some way.”

“You brought me a beer,” the old man said. “You are already a man.”

“How old was I when you first took me in a boat?”

“Five and you were nearly killed when I brought the fish in too green and he nearly tore the boat to pieces. Can you remember?”

“I can remember the tail slapping and banging and the thwart breaking and the noise of the clubbing. I can remember you throwing me into the bow where the wet coiled lines were and feeling the whole boat shiver and the noise of you clubbing him like chopping a tree down and the sweet blood smell all over me.”

“Can you really remember that or did I just tell it to you?”

“I remember everything from when we first went together.”

The old man looked at him with his sunburned, confident loving eyes.

“If you were my boy I’d take you out and gamble,” he said. “But you are your father’s and mother’s and you are in a lucky boat.”

Neither of these characters is consciously eloquent, and the dialogue is extremely simple. But look how much more it does than “one thing at a time”! It provides exposition on the beginning of the relationship, and it conveys the mutual affection of the two and the conflict within the old man between his love for the boy and his loyalty to the parents. It conveys the boy’s eagerness to persuade and carries him into the emotion he had as a small child when the fish was clubbed. The dialogue represents a constant shift of power back and forth between the boy and the old man, as the boy, whatever else he is saying, continues to say *please*, and the old man, whatever else he is saying, continues to say *no*.