

## TABLE FOR TWO

I've always dreamed of having a mentor. A writing mentor to be specific. And to be even more specific, or choosy, I thought my favorite writer, Richard Yates, would have been ideal for the job. Yates died in 1992, and for the last part of his life he was quite ill with emphysema, so this apprenticeship would've needed to take place sometime in the '80s. This was when Yates was living in Boston in a modest apartment on Beacon Street, over a pub called Crossroads. In the research that I've done on my imagined mentor, I've found out the following: Yates would rise early and write until noontime when he would break for lunch, which he would eat downstairs at the pub. Then he would go back upstairs to his room and take a short nap. Upon waking he would return to his writing and do this until dinnertime; his evening meal was also eaten downstairs.

After dinner he did a good deal of drinking. Yates chain-smoked, socialized infrequently, did not watch television or go to the movies, and if you chanced to look in his refrigerator you would find two items: beer and yogurt. The beer I understand; the yogurt still puzzles me, but I suppose it's the odd details that create an authentic biography. Was he a Yoplait man? Fruit on the bottom? I'll never know. And I'll never know Yates, not personally anyway.

I have been to Crossroads a number of times; my brother Jeff lives across the street from it and whenever I visit him we go over for a beer or two. On one of these trips, Jeff plans to introduce me to the owner of the pub, who knew Yates from all those years of close proximity. I'm looking forward to that a great deal.

When we go to Crossroads I don't proclaim to have any great moments of revelation because this was Yates's favorite Boston haunt. (Only Boston haunt, actually.) I do take note of the booth in front that faces the door—that was always the booth he sat in when it was available. I've never sat there even though I've had plenty of chances. And there's no deep meaning here either, save for the fact that you cannot see the TV from Yates's booth and Jeff and I will usually want to watch a ball game or whatever is on.

Invariably my brother will get up to go to the bar and get us another round or go to the men's room and it is when I'm alone that I daydream about Yates and all the time he spent at Crossroads. And I can't help but wonder what it would have been like to be around then when Yates was at his favorite table working his way through a number of highballs and smoking cigarette after cigarette. I've played out our initial by-chance meeting and it's always a grand success:

*Young man (me) walks into crowded pub and cannot find an empty table. Man in front booth (Yates) takes notice.*

**Yates:** I usually eat alone but you look like an intelligent, thoughtful young man. Have a seat. I'm Dick Yates.

**Me:** I thought this would be a quiet place to get some writing done.

**Yates:** You're a writer? Well, then you must sit down. I'm a writer myself. I sit here alone meal after meal hoping for the company of a talented fellow writer. Let me buy you lunch.

**Me:** I'm not much on pub food. I usually eat yogurt for lunch.

**Yates:** [*elated*] Yogurt!

Things take off from here, but Jeff has usually returned to the table by now and we go back to catching up with each other and watching the ball game. I don't have to tell you how my scenario turns out. Yates and I have such a great time together that he agrees to teach me everything he knows about writing. But sometimes it doesn't stop there. Sometimes, my fantasy gets revived later that night and I dream that I am an old man and I live alone over a pub and drink beer and eat yogurt and don't know anyone except for the waitresses and the owner downstairs and I chain-smoke and develop emphysema.

Turns out Yates was going to teach me a lot more than just writing. And then I think it was best this relationship stayed imaginary. But in moments of contemplating all this I realize that Yates *has* been a mentor to me. He mentors me every time I write. There's an honesty in Yates's work that continues to teach me and holds me to a standard to which I'm still trying to aspire. He's not actually looking over my shoulder, but sometimes I feel that he is and that's enough. I'm grateful to him and continue to know him when I re-read his books or sit down to do my own work.

The apprentice-mentor relationship on its surface looks to be a relatively straightforward one: someone teaches, someone learns. But this I'm discovering is an oversimplification. Mark Hewitt, our *Rambler* interview in this issue, got me thinking again about this. Our discussions often turned to his mentor, Michael Cardew, a legendary figure in the world of studio pottery. I found Hewitt's affection and reverence for Cardew inspiring. Although Hewitt is decades removed from this relationship, there is still a freshness to it, something that keeps it ongoing—something that happens, I imagine, whenever Hewitt steps into his own studio to begin a day's work. You'll be able to read about some of this relationship in our interview, but much of it, aspects that we would never be able to fully understand, belong only to Hewitt and Cardew and can only be found deeply embedded in Mark Hewitt's craft. Enjoy this issue. ☺

—Dave Korzon, publisher