

# Why Are You Telling Me This?

An Essay on the Writer's Craft

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**Y**ou're on one of those transcontinental flights, Charlotte to San Francisco, let's say. You stow your meager carry-on in the overhead and wriggle into the middle seat halfway back in the plane. It's a full flight, and soon a woman climbs over you into the window seat, and a businessman wearing a microfiber suit plops into the aisle seat. You buckle up.

You are now trapped, as thoroughly incarcerated as if the air marshal had handcuffed you to the galley stanchion. For awhile, harsh voices talk at you through the intercom, telling you all the things that are illegal on the flight and also how to survive an abrupt termination of the flight—but you already know all that and tune it out as best you can. Then you are blessedly airborne, leveled off at cruising altitude.

The guy in the microfiber suit lets down his tray table and gets to work crunching accounts on his SmartBook, his earphones buzzing with old Journey anthems.

The woman in the window seat, whom you barely noticed before, now turns toward you with a sweet smile. She says, "I'm going to visit my daughter in Alameda, you know she's had such a hard time adjusting to the Left Coast, but then she always was the least stable of my children, and I'm not even going to talk

about the train wreck she called college or that first abortion, but I think she has her act together now, see, she's been meditating and met this other woman, she's a lesbian, so I guess she went to the right part of the country, they're not so judgmental, but I can tell you it gave us a start, me and Willy, when she said she wanted to come out—she was thirteen—and I said come out of what, dear? And Willy was battling diabetes and the vasectomy didn't really work out for him, the way he developed prostate cancer later on and had all that bowel trouble. . . ."

And you, the captive audience in seat 14 E, have exactly one question for your storyteller: "Why are you telling me all this?"

In truth, you don't care. I mean, you really don't care—you want her to suck back all those words; you don't want them in your head.

You're not a bad person; you have a general compassion for humanity, but you also sort of resent being drawn into someone else's private woes without your permission. We all have a right to decide where to invest our energy. It's like this voluble woman is picking your emotional pocket.

Her daughter and husband are just abstractions. She, herself, is an unknown quantity, and the barrage of sudden intimacies is overwhelming. Far from being emotionally involved in her story, you are shrinking back into that place in your mind where you can disengage. You wish you had remembered to bring along those oxycodones left over from your recent shoulder surgery. If you could physically leave the plane, you would—but that would open an equally disagreeable conversation with the air marshal.

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