

Off the Grid

Sara De Waal

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fiction, that I felt free to experiment and play and test out everything I'd learned about fiction up to that point. In one month, I wrote 20 first drafts of 20 new stories and then spent the next seven months revising them and weaving them together into a book of 15 interconnected stories that became my thesis. "Cecilia and Richard" is one of the stories written during that year.

"Cecilia and Richard" is amazing and wonderful—so much love with so little said. Or, better yet, so much said in so few words. You didn't lose a sister or a mother—where does the blessed emotional heft of "Cecilia and Richard" come from?

I did not consciously follow a prototype for this story, nor was I going off a memory or trying to consciously process an experience. In retrospect, though, I can see that I wrote the story in a year following much grief and loss, both my own, but also of people very close to me. I was nearer to loss than I'd ever been and nearer to language than I'd ever been, and the two felt incompatible. This story might have been an unconscious effort to try to bring them together, language and loss. That may well have been the emotional genesis of this work.

It is a beautiful story, so thin yet so rich. Less is more in "Cecilia and Richard," less is much, much more. What's more for the writer? What's to come?

Writing for me remains a constant curiosity—what can words do? I write to find out. I wrote this story to find out what words can do between a father and a daughter after the mother dies. I wrote to sit with them long enough to see which words, if any, might make a difference.

Is there a main idea or feeling that I wanted the reader to take away from the story? I don't think that there is because this story is not about the coming away, it's about the sitting in. If a story is a place to sit in for a while, within the temperamental, flawed, yet intimate shelter of language, then it is worth continuing to write.

JAMES CALVIN SCHAAP ('70)



CECILIA AND RICHARD

Cecilia and Richard, the two characters from de Waal's spare but grand story of the same name, stand unsteadily but a few precious inches from the open wound of the death of their mom and spouse, a space where there are no words; and yet, ironically, almost every word they speak opens to the agony they're undergoing. "Cecilia and Richard" would be a very painful story if the words that do pass between them, spare and tight as they are, didn't also testify to their love, both for the woman who is no longer with them, and each other in their deep grief. It's an unsparingly beautiful story.

You can read "Cecilia and Richard" at bit.ly/3qXl7o5



OFF THE GRID

When I had finished all the course work for my master's degree, I was terrified, because in order to finish the degree I needed a whole book. To accomplish this, I felt I needed to completely change my life rhythms. Our family has this little cabin in the Cariboo Region of British Columbia, which is an hour from any services and two hours from Internet service, but I thought, "Well, I'll just go live up there," and I did.

I had a satellite phone, so every day I'd send a message home, like, "Hey, just checking in. I'm okay," so my family would know I was alive. When the roads were good, I could drive up to the cabin; but most of the time I was there, I had to hike in from a spot an hour down the road.



Every two weeks I'd go into town for Internet service, which during winter and early spring meant an hour's hike *and* an hour's drive. When I needed groceries, I had to take a backpack. A half hour down the road, a little store sold basic things like milk and eggs. When I got lonely, I'd go there just to talk to someone—and buy a pie!

Since coffee shops were still closed because of Covid-19, the only Internet I could access in town was in a strategic parking spot outside Tim Horton's. I Zoomed into my thesis meetings from inside my car, and when I finally submitted my final draft, it was from that same parking spot.

It was remote but amazing. It took me a week or so to get a rhythm. Without Internet and distractions, I discovered days are really long. I'd get up, and for two hours just play—read, doodle, or collect rocks—things I'd do as a kid, plunk about in the garden or collect things. Then I'd take an hour walk. Normally I didn't write anything before one in the afternoon.

After all that play, I became super-productive, usually writing from one to three in the afternoon. After another long walk, I'd do all the cabin stuff, getting water from the lake (in the winter there was no running water) and stocking up on wood for the night. There was no electricity, only solar power, so the shorter the days, the less power I had. My family came up at Thanksgiving and cut a lot of wood for the wood stove. And, yes, I saw moose and bears and lots of ducks. It was, I think, the happiest year of my life, and the most productive.

All that time up north taught me there's more than one way to live and more than one definition of what productivity looks like. It was the first time in my life that I was productive without being tired, and that was a life-changing realization: when things get stressful, I remind myself there's actually another way to live.

And another thing it taught me: loneliness has nothing to do with being alone. My time off the grid was probably the least lonely time of my life.

Plus, there was this too: after that year, I knew I wanted to keep being a writer.

SARA DE WAAL ('14)