

# A Study of Carver's *Preservation*

## —A Crisis of Daily Life—

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Raymond Carver was born at Clatskanie, Oregon, in 1939. Soon after his birth, his family moved to Yakima, Washington, and Carver grew up there. After graduating from the high school there, he worked for a sawmill with his father, but after about six months, he moved down to Paradise, California, and then he entered Chico State College as a part-time student. At the age of eighteen, Carver got married to a girl (16 years old), and they had already had two children when they moved down to California. Carver tells us about it in *Fires*. One of the reasons was that they would have the promise of low-rent housing. At any rate, the change of address brought him a good result; at the college he met a very able man, John Gardner, who was teaching a beginning fiction writing course then, and exercised a strong influence upon his future life. Carver also tells us about Gardner's teaching:

He [Gardner] said he was there to tell us which authors to read as well as teach us how to write. He was amazingly arrogant. He gave us a list of the little magazines he thought were worth something, and he went down the list with us and talked a little about each magazine... I remember him saying during this time, ... that writers were made as well as born... I was impressed with everything he said and did... I remember him as being very patient, wanting me to understand what he was trying to show me, telling me over and over how important it was to have the right words saying what I wanted them to say. Nothing vague or blurred, no smoking-glass prose. And he kept drumming at me the importance of using... common language, the language of normal discourse, the language we speak to each other in.<sup>1</sup>

On the other hand, Carver never tells us minutely about his family life he had for ten years or so after graduating from the college. According to *Fires*, he seems to have suffered from the danger of his home collapse, and to have had no time for story writing. He says about it: "The time came and went when everything my wife and I held sacred, or considered worthy of respect, every spiritual value, crumbled away."<sup>2</sup> Carver continues to mention his family desolation:

Something terrible had happened to us. It was something that we had never seen occur in any other family. We couldn't fully comprehend what had happened. It was erosion, and we couldn't stop it. Somehow, when we weren't looking, the

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children had got into the driver's seat. As crazy as it sounds now, they held the reins, and the whip. We simply could not have anticipated anything like what was happening to us.<sup>3</sup>

The very reason why Carver could not write novels may be partly because of the above-mentioned situation in his family. Carver himself admits it; "During these furious years of parenting, I usually didn't have the time, or the heart, to think about working on anything very lengthy."<sup>4</sup> Thus he found his way to reveal his own genius spontaneously, that is to say, in short stories; "The shortest things I could sit down and, with any luck, write quickly and have done with. . . . Anyway, these circumstances dictated to the fullest possible extent, the forms my writing could take."<sup>5</sup> Such being the case, maybe he could not help depending upon alcohol liquors in his frustration and worries, and he had to go to and leave hospital so often until he finally gave up drinking in 1977.

It was with a collection of short stories, *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* (1976) that Carver took the critics by surprise and established his claim to national notice for the first time. Thereafter, when he wrote a second collection, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (1981), Cambridge University's Frank Kermode spoke highly of him, saying that Raymond Carver was a master of the short form. But it is with his next collection, *Cathedral* (1983) that he acquired a higher public estimation. Especially Irving Howe spoke of *Cathedral* in terms of high praise at *New York Times Book Review*.

*Preservation* we will deal with in this paper is included in *Cathedral*, which has other eleven short stories in it. It is often said that what is recognized in his work at once is a queer effect that issues from its surface simplicity. However, the very simplicity contains many implications, images and metaphors, which are very skillfully inlaid here and there in his work. And Carver's world is really the world of the homely and the unexceptional, colourless and normal people going about the business of their colourless and normal lives. Carver himself explains his attitude of writing to us in *On Writing* :

It's possible, in a poem or a short story, to write about common-place things and objects using common-place but precise language, and to endow those things—a chair, a window curtain, a fork, a stone, a woman's earring—with immense, even startling power. It is possible to write a line of seemingly innocuous dialogue and have it send a chill along the reader's spine—the source of artistic delight, as Nabokov would have it. That's the kind of writing that most interests me.<sup>6</sup>

Therefore, by paying attention to his simple and precise words with various images and metaphors, we will examine what kind of world Carver tried to describe, and at the same time we will investigate his real intention of the short story in the following chapters.

## I

This story begins at the time when Sandy's husband was dismissed three months ago, and the scene tells us that he has become very weak-kneed because of his strong uneasiness and fear, just as the story ends by showing the situation of Sandy who has been struck with an indescribable sensation of uneasiness and horror at the sight of her speechless husband. In the opening sentence "SANDY'S husband had been on the sofa

ever since he'd been terminated three months ago,"<sup>7</sup> we will find the great shock and frustration which her husband underwent. As a matter of fact, we human beings identify ourselves in the meshes of human relationship stretched around real human world. Sometimes we can realize our dream by tracing the meshes at our will. Sometimes we may be disappointed and discouraged greatly by being cut them down completely for the last thing we can think of. In that case, most of us will try to realize our dream or desire somehow, tracing another route even if we take a long circuit for it. As for Sandy's husband, he may be said a man who has melted and fallen down from the meshes of real human world ; this very falling down from the meshes of real world does Carver seem to describe by making use of some images and metaphors. In this story, we will be able to find the real situation of Sandy's husband in some words "refrigerator," "preservation" (the title of this story) and "fridge" trouble because of the leakage of the cooling gas "Freon." In short, Carver seems to compare the falling from real human world to the fridge trouble. If we make the diagram of this metaphor, it is shown like this :

- A : 1) Refrigerator (preservation of food) → 2) the Leakage of the Cooling Gas  
 (The fridge cannot preserve food ; dissolution) → 3) Rottenness of Food
- B : 1) the Real Life of Sandy's Husband (the situation of preservaton in real  
 human world for his job) → 2) Unemployment (melting and falling down from  
 the messes in real human world ; mental dissolution) → 3) Mental Rottenness

This diagram draws A group into comparison with B group. So far Sandy's husband has been preserved in his real life (i.e. refrigerator), but because of his unemployment (i.e. the leakage of the cooling gas), his preservation has been impossible. Thus he has been thrown out from the refrigerator (i.e. real life), and has begun to melt in the outer world. Just as frozen food goes bad in the outhur world, the falling down from real human life means that we have fallen in the helpless abyss which will decay or disorganize our mind. It does not seem, however, that the main factor which puts Sandy's husband into a straitjacket is in the fact that he will be in financial difficulties for his unemployment. If it is so, surely his daily life will be spent to obtain employment. As a result, his relation to the messes of real human world will be the more strengthened for it. As is shown in several paragraphs of the beginning of this story, Sandy's husband is confined in the living room, stiff with fright, like an animal confined in its haunts :

That day, three months ago, he'd come home looking pale and scared and with all of his work things in a box, . . . He took off his cap and laid that on the table, too. "I got canned today. Hey, what do you think's going to happen to us now?"<sup>8</sup>

. . . . .

They talked about what he might be able to do instead of putting roofs on new houses. But they couldn't think of anything. "Something will turn up," Sandy said. She wanted to be encouraging. But she was scared, too. Finally, he said he'd sleep on it. And he did. He made his bed on the sofa that night, and that's where he'd slept every night since it had happened.<sup>9</sup>

But he did not stay at home every day. Indeed he went out to receive "unemployment benefits to see about. Once in a while he had to go talk to somebody about a job possibility, and every two weeks he had

to go sign something to collect his unemployment compensation.”<sup>10</sup> However, we must pay attention to the fact that his face begins to break out in a greasy sweat when he tries to tell Sandy about “the milling crowd of men and women down there.”<sup>11</sup> Now the outer world strikes great terror into his heart.

Here we will wonder why Sandy’s husband is frightened with the outer world so much. Indeed he feels a chain of unlucky omens in everything he sees and hears, which seems to cause his mental disorder. Now we will take some examples suggesting such mental disorder. One day Sandy finds her husband reading a big book entitled *Mysteries of the Past*, and her husband seems to stop reading it at a certain page :

Sandy picked it up once and opened it to his place. There she read about a man who had been discovered after spending two thousand years in a peat bog in the Netherlands. A brow was furrowed, but there was a serene expression to his face. He wore a leather cap and lay on his side. The man’s hands and feet had shriveled, but otherwise he didn’t look so awful. . . . Her husband kept it within easy reach on the coffee table that stood in front of the sofa.<sup>12</sup>

Why does Sandy’s husband adhere to the account of the ancient man so strongly? While he is reading it and watching the photograph, maybe there arose a wishful thinking in his mind ; a wish that he wants to have an everlasting rest for no less than two thousand years without being vexed with worldly cares, because he always keeps the book “within easy reach on the coffee table that stood in front of the sofa.” This fact seems to suggest escape from reality, namely his death wish. Moreover, after his termination, he stays at home almost every day, and reads the newspaper “from the first page to the last ; the obituary section, the part showing the temperatures of the major cities, and the Business News section,”<sup>13</sup> etc. But here he also assumes a strange attitude :

Mornings, he got up before she did and used the bathroom. Then he turned the TV on and made coffee. She thought he seemed upbeat and cheerful at that hour of the day. But by the time she left for work, he’d made his place on the sofa and the TV was going. Most often it would still be going when she came in again that afternoon. He’d be sitting up on the sofa, or else lying down on it, dressed in what he used to wear to work—jeans and a flannel shirt. But sometimes the TV would be off and he’d be sitting there holding his book.<sup>14</sup>

This strange attitude of his, it seems, has been formed from his habitual behaviour in daily life, but on the other hand, this scene suggests the situation of his inability to go outside even if he dresses “in what he used to wear to work.” It is partly because his unemployment gives him a great shock, and partly because he is afraid to go out as ever. Thus, like an animal in a cage, he cannot but take up his position at his den (i.e. sofa), and watch TV now and then, or else he is compelled to read *his book*.

And we will notice another example suggesting his foolish fancy when Sandy tells him to go to the auction to buy a used refrigerator and say, “I used to go to them [auctions] with my dad.” Then he only says, “Your dad,” and does not say anything else. Perhaps he may have been reminded of the situation of the death of Sandy’s father immediately ; Sandy’s father may have reminded him of auctions, cars and then his death by a motorcar accident. In addition, we will find his final foolish association he has when Sandy served to him the pork chops which were burned brown because she cooked them, indulging in reminiscence

of his parents and missing them :

The meat didn't look like meat. It looked like part of an old shoulder blade, or a digging instrument. But she knew it was a pork chop, and she took the other one out of the pan and put that on a plate, too.<sup>15</sup>

Here Carver uses "an old shoulder blade" and "a digging instrument," and the "shoulder blade" is added to an epithet "old." Therefore, it seems that he associated this "old shoulder blade" with the dead person's blade which was old enough to become discoloured. At the same time, "digging instruments" will remind him of instruments for digging a hole in the ground to bury the dead. Thus, these two words become the images of death, and perhaps in the burned pork chops, he will see his own picture, that is, his death. And also these images will lead him and us to the episode of the ancient man who was discovered in a peat bog in the Netherlands.

As we have seen, Sandy's husband does see a chain of unlucky omens in everything he sees and hears, which cause his mental disorder or rottenness in the end.

We have so far referred to the fact that Carver compares the falling down from real human world to the fridge trouble. And we will notice another kind of pattern which Carver seems to have woven into the episode of the death of Sandy's father in order to repeat his main theme. The diagram is as follows :

- A : 1) Refrigerator → 2) the Leakage of the Cooling Gas  
 3) Imperfect Preservation → 4) Rottenness  
 B : 1) Automobile → 2) the Leakage of Carbon Monoxide  
 3) Loss of Consciousness → 4) Death

Like the precedent diagram, every number of A group can be compared with that of B group. Thus, it may be said that this episode will play a role of repeating and exemplifying the main theme of the whole story.

## II

In the preceding chapter, we have seen the mental disorder or collapse caused by everything Sandy's husband sees and hears, but we will wonder why this kind of mental collapse will arise. The answer to this question seems to be given in the form of a suggestion, though not clear, if we examine the mental pictures and behaviours of Sandy who, unlike her husband, has not fallen down yet from the messes of real human world and human relationship. Therefore, we will pursue her mental images and behaviours in the following passages.

In the beginning of this story, we find Sandy and her husband talking about his unemployment :

They talked about what he might be able to do instead of putting roofs on new houses. But they couldn't think of anything. "Something will turn up," Sandy said. She wanted to be encouraging. But she was scared, too.<sup>16</sup>

Though she says, "Something will turn up," she is really scared in her heart. Her fear seems to be due to that of their financial difficulties in the near future. Indeed she thinks that her husband spends all of his time on the sofa because he is ashamed of not having any work now. But as she watches more of her husband's strange behaviours every day, she feels uneasier about him. One day she happens to find his favourite book and reads it to his place. Even when she looks at the picture of the ancient man, she does not feel so much awfulness to him in spite of his furrowed brow, and his shriveled hands and feet. Here it may be remembered that her husband has got a very different feeling from hers about the same ancient man. On this point, she stands out in sharp contrast to her husband. Thinking of their happy past life (the life before just three months), she cannot bear their present situation of daily life. Seeing the sofa, she does not even want to sit on it again, and she cannot "imagine them ever having lain down there in the past to make love."<sup>17</sup> And at the sight of her husband who reads the newspaper from the first page to the last, who is sometimes cheerful but other times keeps his mouth shut, and who reads some books or magazines and watches TV, sitting on the sofa or throwing himself down, Sandy recollects their happy daily life, missing it so much :

He always had a pot of coffee warming on the stove for her. In the living room, she'd sit in the big chair and he'd sit on the sofa while they talked about her day. They'd hold their cups and drink their coffee as if they were normal people, Sandy thought.<sup>18</sup>

It is true their past life was happy indeed, and they could come to a good and mutual understanding through their talking about all sorts of things, and were able to enjoy their daily life like "normal people," though they belong, it seems, to the middle of the lower classes. But at this point of their daily life, she begins to feel more different uneasiness than before :

Sandy still loved him, even though she knew things were getting weird. She was thankful to have her job, but she didn't know what was going to happen to them or to anybody else in the world.<sup>19</sup>

In fact, Sandy begins to notice that things are getting weird, not normal, but she is "thankful to have her job," because her job enables them to make a living. In this sense, she is still in the messes of real human world. On the other hand, she begins to notice another different uneasiness, though rather vaguely. In short, a major cause for her uneasiness is in the recognition that she does not know what is "going to happen to them or to anybody else in the world." At the same time, it seems that this is a strong belief or conviction of Carver's. So far Sandy's husband has worked as a workman for "putting roofs on new houses" and may have thought his job is worth taking pride in even if it cannot be said that he regarded it as his true vocation. In other words, he may have found himself worth living for his work, but all of a sudden he was dismissed three months ago. In a sense, his unemployment has deprived him of his joy of living. Then, what kind of thoughts has a man got when he is deprived of such joy? In his case, he seems to have come to a recognition that no one knows what is "going to happen to them or to anybody else in the world" ; a recognition that our daily life consists of some thin ice which is broken easily, and that even "normal people" who live happy lives in their own way, may fall in at any moment ; a recognition that we live in the world where what was

the whole of life yesterday becomes quite meaningless today, and that our happy daily life is only temporary and will break down as an inevitable consequence. This very recognition of his, it seems, has completely deprived Sandy's husband of his own will power to live on in this world.

In the meantime, Sandy, feeling somewhat uneasy, takes a girl-friend at work into her confidence about her husband. But her friend was not surprised at all and told her about her uncle who had got into bed twenty-three years before, and "wouldn't get up any more."<sup>20</sup> At this, Sandy is depressed and begins to feel the uneasier for it.

One day when Sandy comes home from work, she finds that the refrigerator has gone out, and that everything has thawed, causing a great mess inside. At once she takes all the food out, and begins to cook every food, asking her husband to check the refrigerator. Now that the refrigerator has gone out, she is thinking of buying another fridge, and she feels like going to the auction she has found in the newspaper even if her husband does not intend to go out with her. The auction reminds her of her dead father, and she indulges in reminiscence, so she burns the pork chops. Here Sandy seems to have the same kind of images that her husband has at the sight of the pork chops, and she tries to efface the images and to convince her that it is a mere pork chop. When her husband comes into the kitchen for dinner, she gives him a plate on which lie "the remains of a pork chop." Pocket Oxford Dictionary defines another meaning of "remains" as "dead body ; corpse." Therefore, "the remains of a pork chop" reminds us once again of the ancient man in a peat bog in the Netherlands. After clearing the table, Sandy tries to make her husband sit down, but he keeps standing there. Then she notices puddles of water on the table :

She heard water, too. It was dripping off the table and onto the linoleum.

She looked down at her husband's bare feet. She stared at his feet next to the pool of water. She knew she'd never again in her life see anything so unusual.<sup>21</sup>

Here she is seized with indescribable fear, and she is vaguely aware of something invisible lying between them. But she does not "know what to make of it yet."<sup>22</sup> Then, why is she struck with fear, seeing her husband standing at the side of the table and the pool of water at his bare feet ? It seems that this is because Carver includes a special image in the word "water." Water is often made use of by a lot of poets. According to *Dictionary of Symbols and Imagery*, William Blake symbolizes "sterile waters of materialism and (spiritual) death"<sup>23</sup> by the word, while in W.B. Yeats water stands for "fruitfulness of the body and dreams."<sup>24</sup> Carver's use of water in this story, however, seems to resemble Shakespeare's usage. In Shakespeare "melting, or dissolving in water stands for the dissolution of character (or death) ; e.g. R2 [Richard II] 4, 1, where Richard wants to melt 'away in waterdrops', or Ham. [Hamlet] I, 2 : '0, that this too, too solid flesh would melt."<sup>25</sup> Moreover, the dictionary looks upon the word "pool" as the symbol of corruption, adding on an example in King Lear III. iv. ; "The green mantle of the standing pool."<sup>26</sup> Therefore, the fear with which Sandy is struck, it seems, comes from her imagination that her husband, who has been preserved in a refrigerator of "real life," will fall down from the messes of human relationship and melt or dissolve in water. That is to say, she must have felt instinctively the disintegration of personality, or the image of death and the bad smell of a vitiated mind in her husband who keeps standing next to the pool of water. At the same time, we will feel even an irony in Sandy's husband whose job is to prevent leaking of rain through the roof. However, Sandy tells herself desperately that she should complete her make-up,

“get her coat, and go ahead to the auction.”<sup>27</sup> Now she is trying to efface her endlessly increasing uneasiness or fear, thinking that she lives in real human world in which she has her own job, and which is composed of rules to obey and agreements to keep to. And she must rebuild her sense for the real in order not to be involved in her husband’s falling down from real human world. The name “Sandy” is the abbreviation of “Alexandra,” whose original meaning is “defender of men.” Literally she has encouraged and defended her husband, but now even her own situation, though Carver does not show it very clearly, is about to be in danger.

### III

As we have seen, Carver describes skillfully the falling down of a man from the messes of real human world, and his mental collapse and dissolution by using the refrigerator and its trouble mataphorically. And his belief or conviction is shown in the form of a suggestion. If we try to find it in the story, it is as follows ; no one knows what is “going to happen to them or to anybody else in the world.” In other words, his belief or conviction is that nothing in the world is filled with more dangers than the ordinary daily life of normal people ; that we live in the world where what was the whole of life yesterday becomes quite meaningless today. In addition, we must pay attention to the fact that Carver never discloses the name of Sandy’s husband though he very often refers to him. It may be that Carver does give us a suggestion that this kind of thing could happen to the normal people in this world, not to specially fixed persons such as Sandy’s husband. Therefore, Carver seems to tell us in this story that though most of us take our normal daily life for granted, and make a living satisfied to some extent, even if we are not quite satisfied with it, this real life is just temporary like the food preserved in a refrigerator, and is filled with dangers ; it may be taken outside at any moment, melt and go rotten. With such implication, Carver seems to have named this short story “Preservation.” In fact, Carver seeks the materials for his short stories in “common-place things and objects” around him because such tragedy will happen first at the place where human relationship should be established most naturally, that is, at home.

As stated above, this story is quite different from some modern stories which show us the tragedy resulting from the sensibility of a specified person, and Carver suggests that this kind of tragedy could happen to everyone in the world. Therefore, it may be given as a conclusion that Carver’s intention of this story lies in his attempt to clarify in the verbal picture of his story the invisible power carrying numerous people away against their will, by using metaphors and images at his command.

### NOTES

1. Raymond Carver, *Fires ; Essays, Poems, Stories* (Capra Press, Santa Barbara, 1983), p.28.
2. *Ibid.*, p.25.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*
6. Raymond Carver, *On Writing* (Capra Press, Santa Barbara, 1983), p.15. *On Writing* is one of the essays



in *Fires*.

7. Raymond Carver, *Preservation* (Alfred A Knopf, New York, 1983), p.35. *Preservation* is included in *Cathedral*, a collection of twelve short stories. Subsequent quotations from *Preservation* will refer to this edition.
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*, pp.35-36.
10. *Ibid.* p.36.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.* pp.36-37.
13. *Ibid.*, p.37
14. *Ibid.*
15. *Ibid.*, p.46.
16. *Ibid.*, p.35.
17. *Ibid.*, p.37.
18. *Ibid.*
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Ibid.*, p.38.
21. *Ibid.*, p.20.
22. *Ibid.*, p.46.
23. *Dictionary of Symbols and Imagery*, ed. by Ad de Vries (North-Holland Publishing Company, Amsterdam, 1976), p.494.
24. *Ibid.*
25. *Ibid.*, p.493.
26. *Ibid.*, p.371.
27. *Preservation*, p.46.

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