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## On Raymond Carver with special reference to *Distance* ( I )

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Raymond Carver's novels have no year number. They do not refer to the historical facts like President Kennedy's assassination, the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal which modern Americans use as a datum point in looking back upon a period of their history. Nor do the narrators fix any age. Indeed we can understand the setting of almost all the stories of Carver's is modern America after the Second World War, but it is the time snapped off from the current of the history in America and all over the world; it is the time cut off from the stream of the time itself as well as from the current of the history. The isolated present arrives one after another. In short, the time in Carver's world is the time without normal time or the time which we can call the isolated present.

As for the space in Carver's world, the description about space is more concrete than the time, and not a few stories of his are given place names of the setting. In many cases, they are the place names of existing small towns in North America. So the distributive concept about space is given in outline, but we can hardly feel the impression that the towns are parts of wider space, like parts of America or parts of the world. In many cases, the community in Carver's stories results in having a name for convenience's sake or in being given no name. As could be imagined, large cities do not appear in Carver's stories. It is true the salesman living in Chicago and the couple from San Francisco make their appearance once in a while, but such large cities never become the scenes of his stories; it seems that New York does not exist at all in Carver's world. In short, the characters in Carver's stories live in isolated small towns in the outskirts of the small towns in many cases—cut off from the larger space. In time and space, the space time suspended in midair solitarily; it is the novelistic space in Carver's world.

Another special feature of Carver's is that he never depicts the community though he chooses small towns as the setting of his stories. He persistently depicts the individuals living in the community. In many cases, the individuals do not have any organic relation to the community, which is suggested by the fact that many of his characters live in the outskirts of a small town and almost half of them are out of employment. Almost all the characters do not form an attachment to nor bear hatred against their home towns, and they do not have any special, intimate friends. They are only living in their towns. Carver continued to depict the individuals suspended in midair solitarily in the community suspended in time and space. At any rate, Carver's characters fail to get jobs, confine themselves in the apartments whose monthly rent they may be unable to pay, enter into such conversation as ends in the confirmation of being unable to associate with others rather than become acquainted with them, and vainly try to restore the relation which has already collapsed, and struggle

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to remedy alcoholism. It is indeed a miserable situation, but Carver never depicts such a situation as "misery," which is the greatest feature of Carver's, and he shows indifferently both a daily situation and a miserable one in the same way.

*Distance* we will deal with in this paper has such a special feature of Carver's, and is included in *Fires*. At first Carver wrote the shorter story with the same plot, and included it in *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (1981), and it was entitled *Everything Stuck to Him*, but afterwards he recast it into longer one with some episodes and included it in *Fires* (1983). This story, like the rest of Carver's stories, is written in very simple style and with precise words, but the facial simplicity contains many implications and images which are very skillfully inlaid here and there in his stories. In three-by-five card above Carver's writing desk, there is taped on the wall one of Ezra Pound's admonitions: "Fundamental accuracy of statement is the ONE sole morality writing."<sup>1</sup> Moreover it is said that "Carver fuses so that they denote a few minutes after one has read them."<sup>2</sup> Therefore, by paying attention to his simple and precise words with various images and implications and some detonation after reading it, we will investigate Carver's real intention of this story and also the meaning of the title in the following chapters.

## I

In this story, Carver uses the frame technique to stabilize the reader's perspective on the story.

She's in Milan for Christmas and wants to know what it was like when she was a kid. Always that on the rare occasions when he sees her.<sup>3</sup>

This is the opening paragraph of this story. A young woman visiting her father in Milan urges him to tell the familiar story of their family life when she was a baby:

She is a cool, slim, attractive girl, a survivor from top to bottom.  
That was a long time ago. That was twenty years ago, he says. They're  
in his apartment on the Via Fabroni near the Cascina Gardens.<sup>4</sup>

Now the young woman, whose name is Catherine, has grown up without any physical defect. Urged by his daughter, the father begins to relate the third-person "fable" of two ten-age parents living in a small apartment under a dentist's office. The boy was eighteen and the girl was seventeen when they married. Soon they had a daughter. "The baby came along in late November during a severe cold spell that just happened to coincide with the peak of the water-fowl season in that part of the country. The boy loved to hunt,"<sup>5</sup> which is the important element of this story. At any rate, every night they had to clean the upstairs office in return for their rent and electricity and gas.

The two kids, I'm telling you, were very much in love. On top of this they had great ambitions and they were wild dreamers. They were always talking about the things they were going to do and the places they were going to go.<sup>6</sup>

At this point, the boy and the girl are very much in love, and are full of ambitions and dreams in their

future. However, their “good old days” are doomed to be fleeting and momentary.

Here the father gets up from his chair and looks out of “the window for a minute over the tile rooftops at the snow that falls steadily through the late afternoon light.”<sup>7</sup> Catherine urges her father to tell the story. And the father goes on. The young couple slept in the bedroom, their baby sleeping in the crib in the living room. The baby was about three weeks old and had only begun to sleep in the night. One Saturday night after finishing his work upstairs, the boy enters the dentist’s private office and calls Carl Sutherland, “an old hunting and fishing friend of his fathers,”<sup>8</sup> saying to him, “I’m a father. We had a baby girl.”<sup>9</sup> In response to the boy, Carl says that’s good, and that he is glad to hear it, asking the boy to give his regards to the wife. Moreover, Carl informs the boy of hunting, saying that “the geese are flying down there to beat the band,”<sup>10</sup> and that he shot five geese today. And he tells the boy to come along if he wants to. In fact, the boy called up because he wanted to go hunting. Therefore he promises Carl to meet at five-thirty sharp. Here the father relates how the boy came to keep company with Carl:

The boy liked Carl Sutherland. He’d been a friend of the boy’s father, who was dead now. After the father’s death, maybe trying to replace a loss they both felt, the boy and Sutherland had started hunting together. Sutherland was a heavy-set, balding man who lived alone and was not given to casual talk. Once in a while, when they were together, the boy felt uncomfortable, wondered if he had said or done something wrong because he was not used to being around people who kept still for long periods of time. But when he did talk the older man was often opinionated, and frequently the boy didn’t agree with opinions. Yet the man had a toughness and woods savvy about him that the boy liked and admired.<sup>11</sup>

In *Everything Stuck to Him*, we cannot find any reference to the relation between the boy and Carl. Carver inserts this episode in this story, adding “After the father’s death, maybe trying to replace a loss they both felt, the boy and Sutherland had started hunting together.” About this episode we will think later. Thus the boy hangs up the telephone and goes downstairs to tell the girl to go hunting. The girl, watching while he spreads out his things such as hunting coat, shell bags, boots, long underwear, pump gun, and so on, asks him when he will be back, and tells him to go and have some fun and propose that they should dress Catherine up and go and visit Sully tomorrow evening. And the boy agrees with her. Sally is the girl’s sister who is ten years older, and the girl has another sister named Betsy. The boy was in love with the two sisters, and tells the girl that he might have been married with one of them if they had not been married. In response to the boy’s answer, the girl asks him whom he really loves most in all the world, and who is his wife. Of course, the boy says the girl is his wife. Enjoying such conversation, the girl asks if they always love each other:

Always, the boy said. And we’ll always be together. We’re like the Canada geese, he said, taking the first comparison that came to mind, for they were often on his mind in those days. They only marry once. They choose a mate early in life, and they stay together always. If one of them dies or something, the other one will never remarry. It will live off by itself somewhere, or even continue to live with the flock, but it will stay single and alone amongst all the other geese.

That’s sad, the girl said. It’s sadder for it to live that way, I think, alone but all the others, than just to live off by itself somewhere.

It is sad, the boy said. But it's Nature.<sup>12</sup>

The boy says they will always love each other, and tells the girl about the episode of the Canada Geese. According to *Anchor*,<sup>13</sup> a Canada goose is a representative wild goose in North America, and Americans usually visualize this bird when they say "a wild goose." It breeds in Alaska, Canada and North America, and goes southward in winter. The scene of tens of flights of Canada Geese fling in long V formation and going back to the ponds of sanctuary in various parts in North America is one of the natural objects which add poetic charm to winter in North America. In fact the boy often calls this bird to mind recently and tries to compare the boy and the girl to the Canada geese and to appeal to the girl about invariability. When the girl says, "It's sadder for it to live that way, I think, alone but with all the others, than just to live off by itself somewhere." the boy says that it is sad but that it is Nature." And when the girl asks if he has ever killed one of those marriages, the boy nods, saying that two or three times he has shot a goose, and that a minute or two later he'd see another goose turn back from the rest and begin to circle and call over the goose laying on the ground. At this she asks him with concern if he shot it too:

If I could, he answered. Sometimes I missed.  
And it didn't bother you? she said.  
Never, he said. You can't think about it when you're doing it. You see,  
I love everything there is about geese. I love to just watch them even when  
I'm not hunting them. But there are all kinds of contradictions in life.  
You can't think about the contradictions.<sup>14</sup>

At this point, the young husband regards such sad episode like the Canada geese as the inevitable contradiction of Nature and man's life, while his wife cannot persuade herself of his explanation. Here the gap between the young couple is rather small.

After dinner the boy turns the fire of the furnace high and helps the girl bathe the baby. He is surprised at the baby having half his features like the eyes and mouth, and half the girl's like the chin and the nose. After powdering the tiny body and the fingers and toes, the boy watches the girl put the baby into its diaper and pajamas. Then he empties the bath into the shower basin and goes upstairs. It is cold and overcast outside. Imagining what it might be like tomorrow in the hunting ground, the boy makes his heart flutter. Soon he goes downstairs after locking the door. In bed the couple tries to read books but the girl falls asleep first, with the magazine sinking to the quilt, while the boy fell asleep after checking the alarm and turning off the lamp.

When the boy wakes to the baby's cries, he sees the girl standing beside the crib rocking the baby in her arms. Soon she puts the baby down, turns off the light and comes back to bed. The boy falls asleep again at two o'clock in the morning. Then he awakes to the baby's cries, but the girl cannot awake. Fortunately as the baby cries fitfully for a few minutes and stops, the boy begins to doze after listening. After some time he opens his eyes, and the living room light is burning. So he sets up and turns on the light.

I don't know what's wrong, the girl said, walking back and forth with the baby. I've changed her and given her something more to eat. But she keeps crying. She won't stop crying. I'm so tired I'm afraid I might drop her.<sup>15</sup>

Seeing such a situation, the boy tells the girl to come back to bed as he holds her for a while, and the girl consents to his favour, telling him from the bedroom to rock the baby for a few minutes as she may fall asleep. Sitting on the sofa and holding the baby, the boy jiggles her in his lap until her eyes close. After all, he crawls into bed at fifteen minutes to four. However, a few minutes later the baby starts to cry again. This time both of the young couple get up, and the boy lets loose his indignation.

For God's sake what's the matter with you? the girl said to him. Maybe she's sick or something. Maybe we shouldn't have given her the bath.

The boy picked up the baby. The baby kicked its feet and was quiet. Look, the boy said. I really don't think there's anything wrong with her.

How do you know that? the girl said. Here, let me have her. I know that I ought to give her something, but I don't know what I should give her.<sup>16</sup>

After a few minutes the baby stops crying, and the girl puts the baby down again. But the baby starts crying:

The boy and the girl looked at the baby, and then they looked at the baby, and then they looked at each other as the baby opened its eyes and began to cry.

The girl took the baby. Baby, baby, she said with tears in her eyes.

Probably it's something on her stomach, the boy said.<sup>17</sup>

Here we will notice his views are diametrically opposite to his wife's concerning the baby's crying. Without answering to his saying "Probably it's something on her stomach," the girl continues to rock the baby in her arms, and pays no attention to the boy. At this point, the gap between the young couple becomes much larger. The boy, waiting a minute longer, goes to the kitchen and boils water in a kettle for coffee. Then he equips himself for going hunting. From now on, the young couple enact, so to speak, a fighting scene. To the husband who is going hunting, the girl says:

Maybe you could go later on in the day if the baby is all right then. But I don't think you should go hunting this morning. I don't want to be left alone with the baby crying like this.<sup>18</sup>

In spite of the boy's excuse that Carl will expect him to go, the girl rattles on:

I don't give a damn about what you and Carl have planned, she said. And I don't give a damn about Carl, either. I don't even know the man. I don't want you to go is all. I don't think you should even consider wanting to go under the circumstances.<sup>19</sup>

Though the boy protests that she has met Carl before, the girl does not submit tamely to his opinion, but says that's not the point and that the point is she doesn't intend to be left alone with a sick baby. In these disputing scenes, we will notice the girl uses the word "should" three times and the word "intend" more emphatic than the boy's word "mean." In short, Carver depicts the situation in which

the girl is opposed to the boy's behaviour. The girl gets hysterical because of her frustration in the period of bringing up a child, her husband's favourite utterance to her sisters, and of the loneliness of being left alone with her baby. Thus there is indication that the gap or distance between the young couple becomes much larger. The girl attacks the boy persistently:

I'm saying you can go hunting any time, she said. Something's wrong with this baby and you want to leave us to go hunting.

She began to cry. She put the baby back in the crib, but the baby started up again. The girl dried her eyes hastily on the sleeve of her nightgown and picked the baby up once more.<sup>20</sup>

At last the girl begins to cry, but the baby starts up. In spite of that, the boy equips himself for hunting:

The boy laced his boots slowly, put on his shirt, sweater, and his coat. The kettle whistled on the stove in the kitchen.

You're going to have to choose, the girl said. Carl or us. I mean it, you've got to choose.

What do you mean? the boy said.

You heard what I said, the girl answered. If you want a family you're going to have to choose.<sup>21</sup>

Here Carver depicts the crisis of their family life rather coolly, but at the same time he adds to it the menace of the whistling kettle on the stove. Saying "If you want a family you're going to have to choose." the girl urges him to choose between Carl and his family. And they stare at each other. Despite the persistent crying of the baby's and the wife's earnest appeal for staying at home, the boy leaves the apartment.

The temperature had dropped during the night, but the weather had cleared so that stars had come out. The stars gleamed in the sky over his head. Driving, the boy looked out at the stars and was moved when he considered their distance.<sup>22</sup>

On the way to meet Carl the boy envies the "bright distance of the stars." Carver chooses this "distance" for the title of this story. Carver seems to use the word "distance" not as the distance between the boy and the stars, but as a metaphor of the distance of the human relationship to the girl and him, his dead father's friend Carl, and his daughter Catherine. As Graham Clarke says, "hunting and fishing, as in Hemingway, figure as basic subjects in many Carver's stories. . . . Characters equip themselves for an archetypal escape to the woods. . . in search of imagined selves and an imaginary America."<sup>23</sup> In this way, refusing the girl's earnest appeal, the boy goes to meet Carl and finds Carl's porchlight is on, and his station wagon parks in the drive with the motor idling. When the boy pulls the car to the curb, Carl comes outside. But the boy has decided which to choose, Carl or his family. In response to Carl's apology, "I feel like hell,"<sup>24</sup> the boy relates the family crisis, trying to pick his words:

She was already up, Carl. WE've both been up for a while. I guess there's

something wrong with the baby. I don't know. The baby keeps crying, I mean. The thing is, I guess I can't go this time, Carl.<sup>25</sup>

Carl says, "You should have just stepped to the phone and called me, boy. You know you didn't have to cover over here to tell me. What the hell, this hunting business you can take it or leave it. It's not important. You want a cup of coffee?"<sup>26</sup> In this way, Carl "plays down the importance and appeal of the hunt, thereby giving his companion an opportunity to bow out of the adventure gracefully."<sup>27</sup> Therefore the boy says that he'd better get back. Carl also says; "It's cleared up. I don't look for much action this morning. Probably you won't have missed anything anyway,"<sup>28</sup> adding the words by which he forgives the nonfulfillment of the boy's promise to go hunting with him, "Hey, don't let anybody ever tell you otherwise. You're a lucky boy and I mean it."<sup>29</sup> Hearing the words of Carl's forgiveness, the boy hastens to go back. At this point, Carl has really forgiven the boy because he, intending to protect the boy from others, says in parting with the boy, "Hey, don't let anybody ever tell you otherwise. You're a lucky boy and I mean that." Evidently this scene shows "male world." It is the very world in which man cannot live if he breaks his promise once given, and it is the same world as that of *Men Without Women* (collection of short stories) by Hemingway. Therefore Carl says, "You're a lucky boy."

Parting with Carl, the boy returns home to find the girl and the baby asleep on the bed with the living room light on. After taking off his boots, pants and shirt, the boy sits on the sofa and reads the morning paper with his socks and woolen underwear. Soon it begins to turn light outside. After some time he goes to the kitchen and begins to fry bacon. A few minutes later, the girl comes out in her robe and puts her arms around him, and apologizes: "I'm sorry about earlier. I don't know what got into me. I don't know why I said those things."<sup>30</sup> In response to her, the boy says simply that it's all right. The girl goes on asking his forgiveness:

I didn't mean to snap like that, she said. It was awful.

It was my fault, he said. How's Catherine?

She's fine now. I don't know what was the matter with her earlier. I changed her again after you left, and then she was fine. She was just fine and she went right off to sleep. I don't know what it was. Don't be mad with us.<sup>31</sup>

The boy laughs, giving his forgiveness to the girl, and asks her to prepare something to eat. So she begins to fix breakfast, and soon she puts a plate in front of him with bacon, a fried egg, and a waffle after putting on a record they both like in the living room. And the boy begins to eat. But when he starts to cut into the waffle, he turns the plate into his lap:

I don't believe it, he said, jumping up from the table.

The girl looked at him and then at the expression on his face. She began to laugh. If you could see yourself in the mirror, she said. She kept laughing.<sup>32</sup>

Looking down at the syrup covering the front of his woolen underwear, and at the pieces of waffle, bacon, and egg clinging to the syrup, he himself begins to laugh. After removing the woolen underwear and throwing it at the bathroom door, he opens his arms, she moving into the arms.

We won't fight any more, she said. It's not worth, is it?  
 That's right, he said.  
 We won't fight any more, she said.  
 The boy said, We won't. Then he kissed her.<sup>33</sup>

They laugh together over an overturned breakfast plate and gratefully forgive one another for the day's trouble. The story-within-the story ends with a renewed promise never to fight again.

Having talked the story this far, the father, getting up from his chair and refilling their glasses, says, "That's it. End of story. I admit it's not much of one."<sup>34</sup> The story completes its frame, and returns over the distance of years and regrets to the grown daughter's desire to know what happened later. Now the father seems to live alone in Milan, which "suggests that the composure he and his wife had achieved and had promised to adhere to was transitory."<sup>35</sup> In response to the daughter's request, the father, shrugging his shoulder and carrying his drink over to the window, says, "Things change. I don't know how they do. But they do without your realizing it or wanting them to."<sup>36</sup> The daughter stops talking about the subject, and asks her father to show her the city. The father tells her to put her boots, but he stays by the window, remembering that old happy days. In this way, this story closes with a communion of tears and laughter between father and daughter.

As we have seen, a young woman visits her father living alone in Milan and urges him to tell the familiar story of their family life when she was a baby. The father begins to relate the third-person "fable" of two teen-age couple living in a small apartment under a dentist's office. The boy promises his dead father's friend Carl to go hunting with him, but it happens that something is wrong with the baby, and the baby continues to cry. The wife gets angry at the husband who is going hunting, and urges him to choose between Carl and his family. Driving the car, the boy envies the "bright distance" of the stars because "they maintain a privileged distance from the tension, the noise, and the guilt that he wants to escape."<sup>37</sup> After making an apology to Carl for not going hunting together, the boy returns home to find that the diaper of the baby got wet too early. Before having a morsel of the waffle for breakfast, the boy turns the plate into his lap, and the syrup, the pieces of waffle, bacon and egg cling to his underwear. At the sight of his appearance, both of them laugh until the tears come. The ill feeling between the two has been dispelled and they forgive one another for the day's trouble. Now the father, who was a boy then, remembers their laughter at that moment.

(Continued)

## NOTES

- 1 . Raymond Carver, "On Writing," in *Fires* (Capra Press, Santa Barbara, 1983), p.14.
- 2 . Marc Chenetier, *Living On / Off the "Reserve"; Performance, Interrogation, and Negativity in the Works of Raymond Carver*, in *Critical Angels; European Views of Contemporary American Literature*, ed. by Marc Chenetier, (Southern Illinois University Press, 1986), p.168.
- 3 . Raymond Carver, "Distance," in *Fires* (Capra Press, Santa Barbara, 1983), p.113. Subsequent quotations from *Distance* will refer to this edition.
- 4 . *ibid.*
- 5 . *Ibid.*



6. *Ibid.*, pp.113-114.
7. *Ibid.*, p.114.
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*, pp.114-115.
12. *Ibid.*, pp.115-116.
13. See *Color Anchor; Illustrated Encyclopedia of English Words and Imagery*, ed. by Katsuaki Horiuchi & others (Gakken, Tokyo, 1984), p.146.
14. Carver, *Distance*, p.116.
15. *Ibid.*, p.117.
16. *Ibid.*
17. *Ibid.*
18. *Ibid.*, p.118.
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Ibid.*
21. *Ibid.*
22. *Ibid.*, pp.118-119.
23. Graham Clarke, *Investing the Glimpse: Raymond Carver and the Syntax of Silence in The New American Literature since 1970*, ed. by Graham Clarke (Vision Press Ltd., England, 1990), p.108.
24. Carver, *Distance*, p.119.
25. *Ibid.*
26. *Ibid.*
27. Arthur M. Saltzman, *Understanding Raymond Carver* (University of South Carolina, 1988), p.81.
28. Carver, *Distance*, p.119.
29. *Ibid.*
30. *Ibid.*, p.120.
31. *Ibid.*
32. *Ibid.*
33. *Ibid.*, p.121.
34. *Ibid.*
35. Saltzman, *op.cit.*, p.81.
36. Carver, *Distance*, p.121.
37. Saltzman, *op.cit.*, p.81.

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