

# Introduction

## credits

sit long enough in the dark  
of the theater, and the credits will  
roll down far enough to name  
man on corner . . .

who was only on camera for a  
moment, or perhaps a line,  
moving the tale from here to there  
such a man was in my movie today—

he stood in the dark on ninth street  
waiting for the light to change;  
I drove past and we waved . . .  
Well—it was the guy head bob thing

and I came home to find  
my wife and stereo schnauzers  
ready to play the next scene . . .  
he walked out of my story

and on into the night  
and the rest of his movie,  
of which one credit will say  
man in jeep at traffic signal . . .

“IT BEGINS like this.”  
So went the opening sentence to a paragraph of *Bento’s Sketchbook* by John Berger,<sup>1</sup> which I was reading in a bookstore café. I didn’t get much farther into the chapter because I kept circling that sentence. What begins? What makes a beginning?

Just then a woman began to move into the middle of my curiosity, sliding between the crowded tables to claim the only vacant one available. She was middle-aged (as best I could tell), Asian, a little tired, and quite determined to make sure she got a seat. She carried a large satchel topped with a stack of documents. She pulled out one of the chairs and placed her things on it, then she opened the bag, took out some paper towels, and began to wipe off the table like it was her job, erasing any remnant of those who had sat there before her.

At first I assumed she disinfected out of fear, determined not to be exposed to any lingering germs, but there was not any appearance of anxiety in her movements. The more I watched her (even as I tried not to appear as though I were studying her behavior) I began to see an artist’s flair: rather than wiping anything away, she was creating a clean space, laying down a varnish of intention like a layer of paint or polish, preparing the table for this moment when she would sit with her tea and her notebooks in the last light of the afternoon sun.

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1 John Berger, *Bento’s Sketchbook: How Does the Impulse to Draw Something Begin?* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2011), 21.

My eyes moved back and forth between the words on the page and the story she was incarnating at the next table. She had finished her preparation and had seated herself to begin that for which she had come. She reached in the satchel and pulled out a stack of about ten greeting cards, all still in their plastic sheathes, then she carefully opened one of the envelopes, pulled out the card, and laid it on the table. As she turned to sip her tea, the caption caught my eye:

“Thank you for being special.”

That’s all of the story I was able to follow. It was time to go to work. I wished for the freedom to lean across the chair between us and tell her it had been fascinating to watch her work, but I would have been the only one talking across tables. She had never turned in my direction. She was also not the only story in the room; she was, however, the one I noticed. I marked my place in my book with the receipt from my coffee and made my way out of the store, wondering about the beginning I had seen unfold.

When we were kids, my brother and I used to like to make up stories about people we saw in airports and such. Okay, I liked to make up the stories; Miller was kind enough to listen since we were the only audience each other had during our family travels. My image of who the strangers were leaned toward the fantastic and intriguing. Everyone was a spy or some sort of exotic vagabond. It never crossed my mind to say, “The man in the overcoat is lonely and wishing his daughter would call to see how he is doing,” or “The girl in the corner has kept a journal every day for seven years—and it all rhymes.”

I keep thinking about the woman and the table and the card and wondering how the story continued. It begins like this: on a winter afternoon, she prepared her heart and her table to make time and room to write inside a card whose front panel read,

“Thank you for being special.” Perhaps it was an expression of unflinching gratitude. Maybe they were words that needed to be said to span a breach or mend a wound, but they were not words that came easily, so she had swept the table clean and laid down a layer of love and a blanket of forgiveness in which she could wrap her words and write what she felt rather than what she ought to say. Then again, maybe she was a spy and the whole thing was a brilliant cover.

“It begins like this.” When I went back to the book some weeks later to document the page number for the footnote, I found that what I remembered was not what Berger had written. I had my notebook where I had copied the sentence and yet the memory that had given me meaning was not what was actually on the page. His exact words were, “It began like this.” In terms of letters, a small thing; in terms of verb tenses, a big change. In terms of memory, an important reminder: none of us remembers what actually happened. We remember what we can, what we carried away, what was handed down, what helps us make meaning.

A couple of months after my first book was published my father asked me if I had a second book in mind. I told him I wanted to write a book about home and he responded, “Based on the way you write on your blog, it sounds like you don’t feel like you had a home.” There was pain in his voice I wished I could have taken away, yet I had to agree with him to a point. As one who qualifies as a “third culture kid”—born in one culture, raised in another, and not fully belonging to either—home is not easily defined. As my brother often comments, when someone asks where we are from, we have to answer in paragraphs rather than sentences.

I began jotting things down, remembering stories, and talking to my mother, who is our family Keeper of Addresses

and Details. She remembers more of my childhood than I do. Many years ago, she wrote a book that told our family's story and gave copies to each of us. Ginger and I were engaged at the time, so Mom welcomed her into the family with her personal copy. One of the things she did was to make a list of all of the addresses where we had lived as a family, and that list became a bit of a road map for my wandering home. I went back to that list and then added the places I had lived since—by myself, with roommates, and with Ginger—and the number of residences broke into the forties.

The list sparked my thinking about what had happened in different places and why each place was different for reasons beyond location. I began to think about choosing eight or ten of them as metaphors for home and the verbs we attach to it: making a home, finding home, leaving home, coming home, stealing home. I began culling the list as I made the emotional and spiritual journey back through memories, both owned and borrowed, and began to discover I was writing a much more autobiographical book than I had imagined. Regardless of the building in which I lived, I was inside, I was coming and going, I was at home.

Who knows what really happened. All we have are the breadcrumbs that seem to find us; they don't show us where to go, only where we have been in ways we could not see when we were making the journey.

"Home" is an essential word in the vocabulary of existence, though not always easily defined. John Berger quotes Novales: "Philosophy is really homesickness."<sup>2</sup> Theology seems much the same. Pick up any novel worth its stuff and someone is leaving

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2 John Berger, *And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos* (New York: Vintage International, 1991), 54.

or coming home. The soundtrack of our search for settledness is endless. Whether we have moved our whole lives or stayed in the same place, what home means is a live discussion because a sense of belonging is central to what it means to be human. I've spent the last year curating my collection of stories, re-collecting memories and re-remembering the past in ways that illuminate the path from there to me, from then to now, and discovering home is a moveable feast.

When we start talking about home, we often begin with a place: "Where are you from?" The question is simple enough; the answer, however, is not, even for someone whose whole life is lived out in the shadows of the same buildings. As far back as the stories go, we have learned we came from the very dirt we walk on, so there is something to the visceral connections we have to certain places and to the feelings they evoke when we get to them. But what about home? Does that only belong to those whose fortune allowed them to live in a short list of zip codes?

Building a definition of home is much like adding on to a house without a master plan: things just ramble from one room to the next. To talk about home is to talk about place, but it is also to talk about memories, which are real and unreliable at the same time. How it feels to remember an experience is not the same as actually recalling every detail exactly. I look back at pictures of when I was five or fifteen and what I remember about who I was then and what happened is not a well-documented collection of artifacts, but a rather mixed montage of details and feelings, an essence. What we carry with us are the indelible pieces of our experience, which may not even be the biggest events or the most significant moments. What marks our lives are an offhand comment or a passing touch and, in the middle of everything else that seemed important, we are changed.

When I named my blog *Don't Eat Alone*, I added a subtitle: *Thoughts on Food, Faith, Family, and Friends*. Those four words feel central to what home means to me, though I need to find a word for music that begins with F to make the list more complete because there are so many great home songs. At each address I found myself saying, "This must be the place" because at each address I found another piece of what home meant. Home is where we begin, where we find friends, where we leave, where we learn to come back, where we are, and where we are going. Home is where our story gets handed down, where we learn who we are and who we are expected to be, and where we decide what part of those expectations we want to leave on the curb instead of carrying it all off with us. Home is also where we learn what family means and what love looks like. Home is where we find forgiveness and hope, alongside of failure and disappointment; where we learn how people act when they think no one is watching, and how to get through a day; where we unearth the layers of family, the stories and the secrets. We all bear some family resemblance even if we determine not to be them. Home is not about being the sum of our parts, or simply being molded by or responding to our families. Home lies in the creative tension between the two, even as home lies in more than one place.

I have wondered and wandered from house to house and town to town. Each address holds home in its own way, helping to build a definition that continues to grow and change. Whatever direction I may be moving, whether coming or going, I'm on my way home.