



# Finding a stronger ending

How a writer's rigorous rethinking of his story solved a stubborn problem

**W**RITING THE FIRST draft of “My Bad,” a short story of mine about a marriage in crisis, was as free and easy as any story first draft I’ve ever written. I was done in under a month. At that time, I couldn’t have known that I was about to face a year of torturous revision before I found an ending that worked.

“My Bad” is about a couple, Henry and Maddy, whose 15-year marriage has reached a point where they no longer understand each other. They drive 60 miles out of their city home to see a girls high school basketball team and to attend a post-game party for the team at the house of Maddy’s sister, Devon.

I had my main character, Henry, who, while growing up a teenager in a chaotic household, had found escape on the basketball court; I had Cadence at 17, an outcast on the high school team and its best player; and I had Henry recognizing himself in how she played.

I knew I wanted Henry walking out into a Midwestern landscape near the home during the post-game party—I ended up setting it in one of those rural subdivisions where working farmland sits just across the road. I also knew that I wanted Cadence to appear at some point during his walk, that there would be sexual tension between them (shaded toward the awkward), and that their encounter would later culminate in a confrontation between Henry and his wife.

Finally I had the title, which is unusual since I normally find titling a story agonizing. “My Bad,” a playground basketball term meaning “my mistake,” sounded infantile to me as a term, but I liked it as a title for the same reason. It fit.

All of this material, then, came relatively easily, spooling out at an appropriate pace. What I didn’t have was a compelling way to end it.

## The sister-in-law problem

MY BIGGEST PROBLEM was that I’d somehow worked the story to where it ended with a confrontation between Henry and his sister-in-law. It seemed problematic to end a story about a marriage in crisis and not give the final confrontation to the husband and wife (or was it actually a bold move?). But I had kept the confrontation because I liked the dialogue and thought it was thematically defensible.

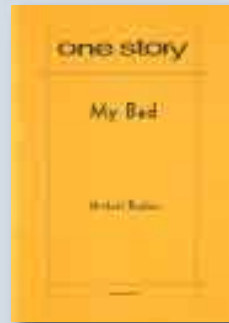
When, in the initial version, Devon says to Henry, as if he were a child, “Slow down, slow down, take a moment, deep breath ...,” I was tapping into a central idea that Henry feels emotionally stunted, a 40-year-old adolescent living in an adult world.

And when Devon says in the story’s original final line, “... Now start over. Start from the beginning,” there was a symmetrically pleasing circular nature, a story ending that sends you back to the beginning. And these weren’t lines I could give to Maddy; they needed to be spoken by someone emotionally distant from the situation, someone like the sister.

But still, I knew the ending wasn’t right. And I was stuck.

## Rethinking the story

MONTHS PASSED. I worked and reworked the first two-thirds of the story until I could do no more.



**THE WORK:** the short story “My Bad” in June 24, 2002, issue of *One Story*.

**THE PROBLEM:** Nearly the entire story has come together, but the writer knows the ending is not right.

**THE SOLUTION:** He carefully re-analyzes his story, discards a gimmicky ending and finds a more emotionally satisfying conclusion.

## Avoiding an awkward conclusion

**LOOK AT THE ENDING** of an early draft of “My Bad,” where I found myself in the awkward position of having Devon, the narrator’s sister-in-law and a secondary character, utter the final line of a story about someone else’s “troubled marriage.”

And next to it, a part of the published version shows the main idea that emerged from my “conceptualization” exercises (writing out my thoughts on the story), designed to find a way around the awkward ending.

### Problem

“You’re not making any sense,” my wife says.

“Wait,” I say. “Let me ...”

“Henry, I can’t believe ...” and she turns away from me, her body rigid and fixed, like something dark and gummy has begun to settle in all her joints.

“Just listen to me. Listen ...” I say. I see that I’m standing at the foul line, the net sways and drops in the breeze, like a ghost is firing one perfect jump shot after another. I remember a time when I was about Cadence’s age when I hit 40 free throws in a row on a bet.

“Slow down. Slow down,” Devon says, like she’s talking to a panicky child. “Take a moment, deep breath, then start over. Start from the beginning.”

### Solution

I’m overwhelmed with this memory of Maddy and me together, sitting on the hood of a car parked on a bridge over a flooded river, the water just beginning to seep over the roadway—we locked eyes into one of those trusting stares that feels bottomless, and it made me want to peel her back to the raw, dive in, and feel every square inch of her insides. I’ve never trusted or wanted a person the way I did her then. Two people could build a life on a moment like that. ...

There was this time when I was about Cadence’s age when I hit 40 free throws in a row on a bet. And remembering this makes me remember it was a girl named Irene, not Maddy, who had held me in an intense stare sitting on the hood of a car over a flooded river ...

—Michael Backus

The first two-thirds of “My Bad” had become dear to me and I was loathe to make any changes to the ending that might require significant rewrites of the beginning. Timidity is not a welcome attitude when a writer is trying to reconceptualize a piece of writing.

What I finally did was show the story to a writer friend and talk it over, and some ideas emerged. I sat at the computer and wrote down what I thought the story was about, recording every idea I could come up with. And out of that, I developed a much clearer understanding of my own story.

First, I realized the circular ending was nothing but a gimmick and not a particularly interesting one at that, with no real thematic connection to the story I was telling. So I jettisoned it.

Then I decided that the story needed to end with Henry by himself, and that since the text had basketball both past and present, basketball should play a part. I had already written a visual image I was quite happy with: Henry at the foul line of the driveway court, watching the net as it

“sways and drops in the breeze, like a ghost is firing one perfect jump shot after another.” To that I added his foul-shooting ritual (“Set the feet first, parallel to each other, shoulder width, centered to the rim, both toes to the line. One bounce with spin so the ball kicks back, chest high.”) and ended with the words: “Shoot. Shoot. Shoot.”

I had an ending. What’s more, this ending pretty much meant I was free from that troublesome Henry/Devon confrontation, since the power of that “infantilized” ending depended upon its position as the very last thing in the story. Which led me back to the need to write a confrontation scene between Henry and his wife.

Here’s where the “conceptualization” work I did with my friend and on my own really paid off. I realized I wasn’t individualizing Henry and his wife’s approach to their marital troubles clearly enough. I had taken for granted that both of them in their hearts understood the marriage was over and were just waiting for someone to make a move. But what if things

weren’t as emotionally clear to her? What if she still had hope? It seemed an exciting idea not only because it allowed me to add some emotional complexity to the ending, but because it humanized her.

Here’s what I came up with. Looking at his wife’s sad face, Henry has a memory of a wonderful evening when he and Maddy sat on the hood of his car, the front tires in water, watching a swollen river flow by in their headlights, and in thrall of the memory, he realizes she is “vulnerable, precious, worthy of the deepest possible love ... —in a word beautiful.” But, then, he realizes the girl he was thinking of wasn’t his Maddy.

It worked. Not all the specific details—it still took some time to hone them into shape—but the basic idea was sound. I had a story. #

### Michael Backus

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