

SIMPLY STORIES – Blood Groove

Craft Area in Focus: Narrative Necessity.

Read story below to see this craft element in action

Narrative Necessity — Seeing the Invisible Architecture

Every story contains elements that could be removed without the reader noticing their absence. And elements that, if removed, would leave a wound nothing else could fill. That second kind is called narrative necessity. It is not something a writer constructs consciously so much as something a story demands — and something a careful reader can learn to feel working beneath the surface. In this story, watch for the details that seem incidental on first encounter. By the final line, none of them will be.

STORY DETAILS

Genre: Post-Apocalyptic Fiction

Subgenre: Survival / Far Future

Narrative Tone: Intimate, spare, retrospective

POV: First person

Story Length: 1,200 words

Why This Piece: Every detail placed in the opening is load-bearing. The ending does not add meaning — it reveals the meaning that was present from the first sentence.

Blood Groove

Tonight, I'm surrounded by the slow, steady schick ... schick ... schick of steel against whetstones. There's no talking. Of what I possess, the cleanest thing I own is my knife. If you're naked and

have a good knife, you can survive. When I was five, my most prized possession was a rag doll soldier my mother made. It remained a comfort, a treasure, long after one of the eyes had fallen off. I remember searching for days to find it.

The opening places two images in immediate tension without explaining their relationship — a knife being sharpened in silence, and a child's rag doll with a missing eye. Neither image comments on the other. The reader's mind reaches instinctively for the story that connects them. That reaching is narrative necessity activating before the plot has begun. Notice also what is absent — no world-building exposition, no character introduction by name, no announcement of theme. The story trusts its images to do the orienting work.

In this stillness, I have crushing memories of a night twenty seven years ago. The sharp crack-crunch of fragile glass shards between my boot and concrete piercing the hollow silence, waking the dead. A jerk on my harness dragged me back around the corner of the alley a split second before a spray of needle flechettes filled the space I'd occupied.

A hot-breath whispered warning passed by my ear: "Be more careful. Come on, we've got to be gone before the militia investigates."

"Up?"

"No, left. And for god's sake, don't shuffle your feet. Heel-toe, heel-toe. Let's go."

And so, my father and I melded into the fabric of night, new cloth woven into old. After passing through the ruins into the

desolation we called the gap, we rested, remaining vigilant, eating the small bits of food carried with us.

During that short rest, he said, “I want you to take three lessons away from this. The first is, for the unwary, normal-looking surroundings can be warning traps — the glass was put there purposefully. The second is they’re running low on manpower, relying increasingly on sensors and automatics.”

“What’s the third, Papa?”

He looked away and moved his right hand, placing his palm against his chest. Under his clothing, against his skin, he guarded the locket holding the last remaining picture of his wife, my mother. His eyes locked on some faraway place I could never see. “The third rule is to always have two exit routes other than the approach. Moving backward can be deadly.”

The father delivers two tactical lessons directly. Then comes the third — and the story changes register, the emotional and tonal frequency at which a passage speaks. Before the lesson is spoken, a hand moves to a chest. A locket appears. Eyes go somewhere unreachable. The tactical instruction that follows arrives carrying the full weight of a man who converted the loss of his wife into a survival rule and is passing it to his child. This is narrative necessity operating on two levels simultaneously. The tactical content is necessary to the plot. The locket, the hand, the faraway eyes are necessary to the emotional truth beneath the plot. Remove either layer and the scene loses something no other scene in the story can restore.

My near death, my father and I on the run, searching for hope and trust ... a way out. Luckily, those auto-guns had been aimed and

guided by sound, not body heat. These are the thoughts that rattle and shake me before going out.

Into this silent circle we converge for communal edge-working. I'll be fine once I stand to leave with my squad.

Tonight's raid is to rescue three of our own, recently captured at the boundary of our fiefdom. We have good leaders, good families, and talented artisans, but few are warriors. By need, our forays are sharp, rapid thrusts, with even faster retreats.

My squad will provide cover on the right flank to prevent reinforcements from moving to the attack area. Our secondary purpose is to gather any portable tech and tools left unattended. The left flankers, blocks away, will be in a position to make off with seed stock from the storehouses.

The pacing watchmen aren't there to raise alarm of raids. Their task this night, as every night, is to deter thieves living in their community. The more capable warriors of their clan and kin are further out at the edges, guarding approaches to their enclave. Except the one we will use tonight.

We're careful to avoid overuse of that route to prevent its discovery. Our path took us through abandoned drainage tunnels, dug passages, and breakthroughs into now-useless utility shafts, threading up and outward, tying to points of former industrial and commercial centers. This is the same route my father led me through in echoing darkness and filth on the night of our escape.

While eight of our numbers guard the rear lanes leading to the strike force's objective, four of my squad will raid the nearby warehouse holding recovered and cleaned elements from older times. With rucksacks half-full of rags to wrap our treasure finds and blackened knives in hand, we creep closer — nothing rattles, nothing

shines — heel-toe, heel-toe. My target is the watchman on the right-hand corner of the low brick building, furthest from the entrance.

When you need to cut a person's throat, you have two choices. The curved, razor-sharp edge or the opposing offset saw-tooth along the blade's spine. I like the former. It allows me to quickly rip out the larynx, preventing warning grunts and cries by exposing and widening the airway.

I've come to appreciate the effectiveness of the ratcheting effect my knife has on its quick ride across the thin, vulnerable ridges of soft flesh and cartilage. I keep the other option for times when my targets don't present their necks well. Then it's the thin, sharp edge — a drag from knife heel to tip, followed by a rapid plunge-twist motion to sever something important, stifling any reactive sounds.

It can be surprising how loud a bloody breath gurgle is if you just cut muscle and jugular, not to mention the spray and rapid accumulation of gushing, slippery blood. To avoid the body's natural leg jerking, it's best to pivot to the side as you make the cut, using leverage to lower the dying body to the ground. After that, it's a follow-up search between the ribs for a thrust to the heart. It's then I appreciate the blood groove on a well-made knife.

At night, familiar natural sounds fall easy on the ear. In contrast, clicks, clanks, or whispers are needle stabs to the brain's attention center, activating the adrenal gland. A side-effect is tunnel vision. Unfortunately for my target, she focuses on the sound of a pebble landing on pavement fifty feet away, followed a few seconds later by another hitting the roof a bit closer, causing her head to rise, looking up. As I said, a well-presented neck makes the job easier. She's left-handed. I approach from the right, slightly behind.

After lowering her to the ground, I clean my blade the way father taught. Quick, efficient, clearing the blood groove. “Heel-to-tip, always heel-to-tip” he’d said.

We slip into the warehouse. In near-total darkness, other than by size, texture, and weight in hand, it’s not easy to determine what you grab in heists like these. Since this is an aside from the mission objective, anything we collect from the old days is a bonus. Even if we have no clue as to the purpose, if it fits in our sacks and doesn’t make noise, we take it. Ninety seconds from our entry we leave by a different path.

When we lose one of our own on a mission, we hold a silent memorial before crossing back into our land. It’s a simple ceremony, one of shared pain. Squad circles form, each member facing outward, holding their knife in the right hand, left arm outstretched toward their mate on that side. The leader begins with a slow, blood-drawing drag of his blade across the forearm of the warrior next to him. And so it goes, silent wounds, around the circle until the leader has been marked. It’s a reminder of the pain the lost one’s family and friends will endure on our homecoming.

You’ve counted my nine scars before. No new ones tonight.

Nine scars. No new ones tonight. Six words follow a full description of the mourning ritual — its shape, its purpose, its emotional weight. Then bare arithmetic delivers what ceremony cannot. Nine missions where someone did not come home. Tonight is not one of them. The phrase works because everything before it earned it. The ritual earns the scar count. The scar count earns the six words. Notice also the shift in register — from the ceremonial gravity of the ritual description to the flat precision of a soldier for whom loss is a unit of measurement. That tonal contrast is where the emotional force

lives. This is narrative necessity at its most compressed. A number. A negation. Everything the story needed to say about the cost of this life, without saying it.

It's time to learn these things. Now, blow out the candle and tuck in with your doll. You have evasion training tomorrow and need to be well-rested for that. Goodnight, Anna.

Goodnight, Mommy.

The final two lines rebuild everything the reader understood about the story. The warrior is a mother. The listener is a child. The story — missions, scar counts, squad rituals, throat-cutting mechanics delivered in the calm register of a craft instructor — has been a bedtime story. The doll is in the room. It has been in the room since the opening line. The rag doll soldier the narrator searched days to find as a five-year-old is not a memory of her own childhood comfort held in contrast to a warrior's life. It is a memory of herself — and a foreshadowing of the daughter she is now preparing for the same world. Every element of the story snaps into a new configuration. None of it requires explanation. The reader feels the reassembly happening in real time. That is narrative necessity working at full strength — not connecting the story's parts but making every part irreplaceable, so that the final image does not tell the reader something new. It reveals what was always true.