

# Recap

Brian McMann had planned it very carefully so that he would only be in town a single day and leave right away afterward never to return. He did not like having to come at all but it had seemed as though it might probably be expected of him – something that he ought to do, or more precisely, what others might later think he ought to have done. So he would see it through. His Aunt Jill was after all the last of the McManns and was certainly not responsible for his father having run off with that other woman right when his mother had taken ill. Aunt Jill had probably been a good person; she certainly hadn't done anything that he had ever considered out of line, although quite honestly he had never known her other than to say "Hi" as he hurried through supper on those few occasions when she visited. He would bury her along with the rest of his non-inheritance.

On the way to his hotel he stopped off at the U-Dis Market to get something for a quick breakfast in the morning. He was surprised to encounter his former adviser, Professor Gordon, or *Muriel* as she had used to insist he call her when they were alone. He had noticed only that a frumpy forlorn figure stood there beside him facing cereal possibilities before finally realizing that it was indeed *she* beside him. He had strolled around and into that aisle too rapidly; retreat at that point was out of the question or he certainly would have done it.

"Hello," he said, trying to sound happier than he felt. Professor Gordon had taken a very special interest in him 'back in the day', as they say. And then... so had Muriel, he mused.

He noted her all-too-apparent happiness at encountering one of what must have been very few successes of her tutelage. After having blushed and effused awkwardly for some time about the pleasure of seeing him again, she had proceeded into the usual associated small talk. Eventually she got around to asking whether Brian could make himself available to give a lecture to her class in creative writing while he was in town.

The opportunity of extending this chance encounter further in that particular direction definitely held no appeal for Brian at this point in his life... or what he perceived as this point in hers, but there was certainly a sense in which he owed her at least that much. The extent to which this obligation was accurately perceived involved reasons that would take his thoughts too far afield of what there was to be said here.

"What would I tell them if I were to do that?" This had been a painfully delayed response followed by a chuckle. "I'm a writer, not a professor," he said, making a very clear distinction between their current situations, the question merely feigned an interest he did not feel concerning which aspects of the craft she happened to currently be covering in her course.

"I've been trying to convince my students – without much success I might add – of the necessity of probability and the use of foreshadowing if they are to keep the reader involved in their stories." Then adding weight to the perceived obligation, she added, "You seem to have mastered that."

Ignoring the flattery he changed the subject. "I'm only in town for a couple days. I'm seeing to funeral arrangements for an aunt – my last living relation – then I'll be gone with no more reason to ever return." It was a bit too smug to be sure, too cold. He was aware of that, but he had realized too late that she might actually have considered herself to be one of his "living relations" of a sort or at least a "reason" for an occasional visit. But the statement expressed how he felt, except for having forgone use of a more conclusive, "I have left nothing at this particular hot dog stand", so he didn't withdraw it.



"Oh", she said, clearly taking offense at having been so desultorily distanced as though he had actually said "hot dog stand". She now withheld any expression of sorrow for his aunt or the possibly bereaved nephew, with a look that said, "You may have left nothing, but you sure did take a lot."

It was obvious to Brian then that she must indeed have considered herself sufficient reason for an occasional returning or at least a communication as some sort of acknowledgment of a former warm student-teacher relationship. Perhaps he had indeed owed her that much although certainly not for the even warmer relationship they had shared with considerable passion on occasion as man and woman. That had always been with both knowing – even explicitly stating right from a first diffident dalliance – that their relationship could go nowhere. That was exactly where it had led. Nowhere.

"When is the class?"

"It's a two o'clock Monday, Wednesday, and Friday."

This was Tuesday evening. It would be understandable that his schedule could not accommodate the importunity. The funeral was scheduled for eleven thirty tomorrow at the other end of a big city and his flight departed at 5:45 in the afternoon from the airport that was back some distance from town in the other direction.

She grabbed a small box of Trix to place in her basket and proceeded to stroll off almost casually down the aisle. "James Hall, room 221, if you can make it." She was already halfway down the aisle seeming now to be in accord with his minimizing of the importance of this chance encounter. "Continued success in any case," she added as though they had been mere acquaintances.

"I'll try to make it tomorrow." He wasn't sure whether she would have heard him even though he had said it above his normal speaking voice. She had disappeared around the end of the aisle to finish her shopping.

Her receding figure brought back memories. Even fully clothed and with the inevitable changes so unkindly wrought by time, she had a nice figure. He counted the years since he had known those more subtle curves intimately. He stood there for a moment totally embarrassed at what had just transpired. He was irritated that the encounter should have occurred at all, her seeming to treat their former relationship as something more than either had promised, and his having come off as ungracious for all he had legitimately to be grateful for.

He chafed at having thought he could get through this whole charade of 'you can't go home again' without incident. But there it was. He realized now that he shouldn't have booked a room in the U District if he hadn't wanted to encounter someone from the U. That had been stupid of him. He snatched a small box of Cheerios to put next to the pint of milk he already had in his hand-carry basket and checked out directly.

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After a restless night he sat eating his Cheerios with a plastic spoon from a coffee cup, sipping coffee from another. He recalled more pleasant occasions of eating cereal with Muriel, her tricolored Trix and him his Cheerios.

He wondered whether he (it was almost as though the 'he' were an unknown commodity who just happened to share the name Brian McMann) would venture to Muriel Gordon's classroom today, and what, indeed, 'he' would have to say if he did. It wasn't as though Brian ever worried about being speechless or caught without words in such a situation. He was never without words.

He was a talker, one could almost say. There had been times in his early years that he had thought he might like to be a preacher, although even then a multitude of reasons suggested the impossibility of that. But it did seem that his musings had a way of aggregating themselves into the sort of verbal structures encountered in sermons. This tendency of his thoughts he acknowledged as most definitely a personality flaw that would sooner describe a difficult situation than act so as to ameliorate it. Very probably that had some bearing on why he had become a writer. Luckily, perhaps, he had not subscribed to his mother's fundamentalist Christian sect where lay members pontificate on Sunday mornings oblivious to the Dunning–Kruger effect that obscures for them the ineptness of their reasoning. Nonetheless he seemed to have a storehouse of ready-made sermons that he purposed now should remain securely locked where they were if he were later to happen into room 221 of James Hall.

Emptying the remainder of the half-pint of milk into the wash bowl, he tossed the container and cup liners along with the box of Cheerios that was still nearly full into a wastebasket. He should have gotten one or two of those fist size boxes he acknowledged and not have been so wasteful, but he hadn't, so who cares? After a quick shower he put on the suit he had brought with him for the occasion of the funeral, packed his bag to be ready to leave afterward, and left the room. He had already settled his account with the hotel, so he proceeded down the elevator, into the rental car, and headed north to the funeral home.

He had time enough to settle his business on the arrangements he had phoned in immediately after having been notified of her death. The service itself was brief with few in attendance.

Brian didn't know any of those who testified as to the merits of Jill McMann nor could he have verified or denied any of their claims. He had nothing to say himself since he had not actually *known* her. The homey sermon welcomed her home in any case and encouraged the rest in attendance to strive to achieve that same state of blessedness. Several of his aunt's friends evidently knew Brian by reputation even if he did not know them. They cloyed his favor with flattery concerning his latest book, although in one case a book title was praised that Brian knew to be by an author who had died a decade earlier. In any case Aunt Jill's vacant body was going underground by one o'clock with him still not having made a decision on whether to drop in on Muriel's class.

He was on the freeway headed south skirting the university when he noticed what he remembered to have been James Hall and the neighboring buildings in the quad towering above intervening local residences. It was only then that he decided finally to take the university off ramp, committing only to seeing whether he could find a place to park somewhere near James Hall. He wound around for some time amidst the changes to the roads and parking areas that had occurred on campus since he had left. He took his time with every aspect of parking and then taking less than a direct path from his car to James Hall following memories of a much earlier and less cluttered time. He reached James at just before two, finding room 221 again just as the final bell rang. The hallway was completely emptied of students when he reached the doorway.

He stepped into the room. Muriel looked up somewhat surprised he thought, but made no flutter, proceeding directly to an introduction of him as guest lecturer for the day.

"Some of you may be familiar with the writing of Brian McMann," she said. "Well, this is Mr. McMann." There were a few surprised faces he noticed. Some of the students must have read a book or two of his. "He was once a student in this very class," Muriel continued, "and has long since become a first-class writer. Today he is going to discuss – perhaps among other things – the importance of probability in fiction." Then looking at him full on for the first time, "Brian, I am very interested to hear what you have to tell us based on your successes."

So... here he was, with none of his locked repertoire of sermons seeming quite appropriate.

"Readin', writin', and 'rithmetic – the three Rs – is what it's all about, I guess," seemed to come out of its own accord. "Today Professor Gordon evidently intends for you to learn something about arithmetic – probability. Probability is, after all, just a numerical assessment between zero and one of the justifiability of an assertion. Of course, the writing of fiction involves a string of assertions that although not factual must be made to *seem* so. That subterfuge results from constructing a sequence of plausible statements, each of which *could be* a fact even if it *isn't*. The final episode or climax of the story, wherever it occurs in the sequence, must seem inevitable in some sense."

Here he paused, not knowing exactly where he was going to go from here, but not very concerned about it. It was more or less like strolling in a yellow wood where one might choose one path rather than another, either being pleasant enough.

"So... that's the basics of the 'rithmetic you need to know to accommodate your readin' and writin'." He smiled and the students smiled with him. "These first two Rs are the really important endeavors of creating a worthwhile story line. Reading and writing form a duality no less than do waves and particles in physics; they are two different ways of looking at the very same thing. In order to comprehend what is involved in the creation process you have to understand the interplay between these two. I'm sure that without exception it is your pleasure in reading that has gotten you here since this is, after all, an elective..."

He paused here, looking over at Muriel. "This class is still an elective is it not?"

"Yes, of course it is."

"Okay. So you're all avid readers of literary fiction and not just romance novels, detective stories, and Sci-Fi. Am I right?"

Although far from unanimous, there was a buzz of yeses in response.

"Reading is very mind-expanding and all the other pithy phrases we use to justify what we like to do anyway. But sometimes it can be a bit frustrating – depressing really. Well, that's not exactly the term I should use perhaps since depressing stories can sometimes be quite satisfying to have read and produce a sort of pleasure in their own right. Life itself is sometimes depressing – well, okay, quite often." He paused here and smiled. "I myself have just come from a funeral, which is the only reason I am wearing this depressing suit." There were muted chuckles. "Certainly every life ends in death if we extrapolate from what we know of the past to include the nine billion or so apparent exceptions to this rule – including ourselves." A little more laughter.

"Okay, so I get all that. I also understand, of course, that the writer chooses where to begin and terminate a story, which in itself affects its tone. But more importantly than the mere sequence of events is what the story is about – not the plot, but the theme, if you will. Is it to be about love lost, a returning, an awakening to a reality, or et cetera? That sort of thing. Among these choices that an author must make is the genre in which he will write. In other words, are you going to write a story that fits with those 75% of published books conscribed by a template of romance novels and detective stories, or will you forgo such artificial constraints. One would not read a romance novel without desiring and fully expecting that boy meets girl, they have an erotic fling, and then go on to live happily ever after. Nor would you read a detective story without an expectation that the good guy will survive in the end, with evil being assuaged although possibly at the expense of a few minor good-guy character sacrifices along the way. These are the templates of the genre.

"Naturally I prefer my coffee black and my literature unencumbered. That's just the way I am and I restrict my readin' and writin' accordingly. I assume that most of you are probably of the same mind at this point in your careers where you have not yet felt the extreme pressure to write what sells. But that's another story and another kind of probability."

"In literary fiction per se there are no such rigid constraints with regard to whether a story can have a feel-good ending or end miserably other than to maintain a sense of reality writ large as probability. This is in itself a constraint, of course. Of course, one must dispense with plots involving any deus ex machina, and while you're at it, please get rid of all excess sentimentality – that stuff can be nauseating."

There is a rustle of more laughter, clearly he has the audience. However, glancing over at Muriel, he is not so sure that he has her.

"Knowing the sort of stuff we like to read is a major clue with regard to the kind of stuff we ought to try to write. A meaningful exercise is to read something by an author you particularly admire and then try to understand how he or she weaves the elements of fiction into his story. Then you are ready for an assignment of emulating something that you could imagine having been written by that author. The plot and writing style of the result will be different – your own – but there should be a look and feel that is reminiscent of the author you have targeted. I highly recommend that you try that sometime."

Muriel interrupted helpfully: "We did that on an earlier assignment, didn't we class?"

The class responded a joyful agreement.

"Sometime or other," Brian began again, "you will have learned enough about writing that you will become frustrated, baffled, even disappointed by what even your favorite author has done with a particular story. That can be a valuable learning experience too. Let me just give you a little example with regard to Wallace Stegner who happens to be one of my own favorite authors. How many of you here have read Stegner?" The show of hands revealed only three. "Only three? What a shame."

He laughed and the class laughed with him. Secretly he took pleasure in knowing that Stegner's success would last some little bit longer just because of Brian McMann.

"Have any of you three happened to read *Recapitulation* by that author?"

One girl raised her arm smiling broadly, and of course Muriel tipped her hand upward without show. So the accurate count for the room was five Stegner readers.

Brian addressed the girl, noting her extreme beauty as he did so, "And what's your name?"

"Nola," she answered, clearly noting the emerging humor in this whole situation.

"Nola," he exclaimed. "Are you putting me on?"

"No," she said. "That's why I read it. It's one place other than on the fuselage of a B-29 destined to nuke a hundred thousand people and in acronyms since Katrina where my name is prominent." There was uproarious laughter at this.

Brian found himself caught up in it, saying frivolously, "I don't suppose you've taken up flying or playing the sax on that account?"

"No, of course not, I think the B-29s are all grounded and I'm not into The Big Easy."

Only Muriel seemed less than totally enthralled by this excursion.

"Did you enjoy the book, Nola?" he asked finally.

"No... not so much." A definite but understated repudiation that drew some snickers.

Brian waited a moment and then pursued, "Why not?"

"He didn't even make the phone call!" She demonstrated the outrage she had felt. "One simple little task that the entire book leads up to and he doesn't do it. Does that make a great author?"

"No. No, I don't think it does," Brian responded. "That's why I said at the outset that I was frustrated by the book." He was exultant that Nola had so effectively made the point he had been about to make.

"There are obligations that an author takes on in writing a story. He is constrained by more than mere probability, or perhaps it is within the realm of, or at least very closely related to probability. That constraint imposes an additional obligation. This is what we could call inevitability, although it's usually referred to as 'foreshadowing'. In *Recapitulation* Stegner set up an inevitable event – the phone call to which Nola referred. But despite toying with the eventuality of making the phone call throughout the book, skillfully adding significance to the foreshadowed event, he denies us any resolution whatsoever. We desperately want to know about the friend who made all the difference in the protagonist's life, and of course also what has happened to *Nola* (emphasized the name for obvious reasons) after all these years, the girl whom he had loved and who obviously had loved him in return. And yet, in spite of all this expectation the protagonist decides at the very end to not make the call. Now that's what I meant when I said earlier that a book can sometimes be very frustrating, a depressing disappointment. Those kinds of decision are, after all, not the protagonist's to make. They are obligations on the author and I think Stegner shirked his responsibility in this case.

"So great a writer as Wallace Stegner seems to have let his story gain the upper hand so that even an event that he had twice foreshadowed never happens. We are left with questions not so much about the characters in the story as about the author. Why would he have done that?"

He paused a bit and then asked, "Nola, do you have any impressions of why he might have avoided the minimum of what was expected of him as a writer?"

"No. I said I didn't like it."

"And so you did."

Brian was done. No more of the sermon came to mind.

"As Professor Gordon stated earlier, I have a plane to catch, so I think I'll just leave off here. I hope I haven't shattered too many illusions. Keep writing."

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Muriel seemed put out by Brian's so abrupt termination, but quickly went through a more than adequate thank you after which he was summarily excused. But even as he began walking toward the rear of the classroom, she had begun to wrap up what he had been saying. By the time he had reached to the back of the room he was caught up in her version of what he had been talking about, so he sat down in one of the vacant seats at the rear of the room to hear what she might have to say.

"I'm sorry Mr. McMann hasn't time to more fully expound on the limits of probability, which he started to get into with inevitability. Like anything else, one can over emphasize probability of course. For example, if you were writing about a political situation before the turn of the current century and you suggested that an American administration would rush to war because of claims of weapons of mass destruction that had repeatedly been repudiated by on-sight inspections, you would lose readership. Why? Because... it would seem too improbable. Nonetheless, we all know what happened in that regard. That truth is stranger than fiction may be trite, but it's true."

She smiled broadly at the class and Brian could see how the class reacted to her, recalling the pleasure he had taken in her lectures years before.

"Remember, you don't have to prove that the events in your story actually occurred, you just have to make it feel like they had.

"To enable the rest of the class to understand what Brian was discussing one-on-one with Nola as two insiders, let me just summarize a little of what *Recapitulation* is all about:

"Bruce Mason is an influential statesman who has driven nearly a thousand miles to Salt Lake City just to bury his last remaining relative, an aunt he barely knew and didn't particularly care for even though he had gone through all the motions of seeming to care. He has for years paid for her keep in an upscale retirement home, but has never visited her or apparently communicated with her in any way. So clearly he has come for other reasons than to express grief for the aunt, probably (that word again) to get some purchase on what were mostly very unhappy years growing up as an outsider in that city."

Brian is immobilized by what he sees as a sermon directed at him. He would like to leave, but he can't; it would be too obvious now. Clearly Muriel has connected dots that he had thought to be mere random similarities between his own return and that about which *Recapitulation* was written. What else would she have to say about *him*?

"Bruce clears the bills with the funeral home, which happens now to be situated in what had been an apartment building where Nola had lived when he had been in love with her. He is allowed to enter the very room she had shared with a roommate. The room has not yet been fully renovated. His reminiscences attempt an inept denial of the extent to which he had actually been in love as against having experienced something – but what – else. Observing his varied remonstrances to the contrary must convince any astute reader that he is in denial of an obvious fact. 'Thou doth protest too much.' That sort of thing. Nor apparently has Bruce ever married. He is, as they say, married to his job.

"As he leaves the funeral home he is given a box wrapped with a ribbon that has his name on it, about which he is told that his aunt had designated that it be given to him after she died. He is also given a piece of paper with a phone number written on it. Someone had called the funeral home, evidently suspecting that Bruce Mason might come to town for the funeral, and requesting that he call the number. He asks who had left the number and is told only that the woman who had called refused to leave a name or address. A woman.

"Clearly any writer who reads *Recapitulation* will understand that Stegner has intended to foreshadow an event that must come about before the story ends as surely as a pistol appearing on stage in Act I must be fired before the final act is over. A phone call must be made.

"Sensations conjured by revisiting his haunts that still exist and envisioning others that are long gone uncover the insecurities and unhappiness of a brilliant child growing up in a low class family that lived, because of his father, beyond the edges of the law. He seems to acknowledge that it was his friend Joe Mulder who gave him the full measure of self-confidence that has allowed him to escape what would otherwise seem to have been a very ugly fate. He realizes that it is he himself who has failed to maintain contact with Joe – that his moving about the globe in the service of the state department would have made it all but impossible for Joe to keep up with his many address changes. So he looks up Joe Mulder in the phone book to find that there is someone by that name whose current address is the same as Joe's parents had been back when Bruce had lived in town. He searches for a piece of paper on which to write the phone number, coming finally to the piece of paper in his pocket that he was given at the funeral home. After having written it down on the backside, he turns the paper over, noticing that the same number is written on both sides. Once more we are struck that there is inevitably a phone call to be made."

Brian was amazed again at how different a story can sound depending on who is recounting it. He is getting a little different perspective on Bruce Mason now, although Muriel is definitely following Stegner's story line.



"The story proceeds with Bruce in his hotel room opening the box which contains his letterman's jacket, photos, and letters that he had originally sent to Nola. He remembers that she had attempted to give him this very box after their separation, but although he had been at Joe's parent's place when she brought it, he had refused to meet her at the door. He had forced Joe to answer the door; it was Joe who accepted the box that Bruce thereafter refused to even open. Evidently Joe had finally taken the box to Bruce's aunt at the rest home – all many years ago now.

"We go through the mementos in this box one by one with Bruce. They reveal a lopsided relationship between Nola and him. Annoyed, he scans one of the letters, leaving the rest, evidently recalling the messages they contain. Bruce has always seen his and Nola's ultimate demise as his having been betrayed, but any rational reader sees the evidence to indicate that the opposite is more nearly the case. At the end of the book, the funeral over and Bruce, in a hurry to get to his next assignment, tosses the entire contents of the box as well as the piece of paper with the phone number on both sides into the wastebasket and leaves."

"So... as Brian asked, did Stegner screw up or are we failing to understand something brilliant that would be obvious to anyone but a writer?" No one answered. Clearly the question was rhetorical.

"Here's what I think," she began in earnest now. "Bruce Mason saw himself as very talented, which he was. He saw himself as a self-made man. But he wasn't; no one is. Remember that – no one is; without a leg up, no one gets up very far. He saw himself as a good person in contrast to his father. But he wasn't. He know wasn't because we know that in addition to never intentionally hurting anyone, a good person helps others, and Bruce Mason definitely never helped anyone in any capacity that was not a remunerated obligation – that word again. Obligation. Even his own recollections fail to identify more than a tiny portion of the extent to which he had been helped by others. He saw himself as having been devoted to Nola, but he hadn't been. I need not recount the ways. Nola here," she glanced at the girl, "knows from having read the book."

Brian was stymied by her interpretation. Bruce had not been a bad person. He had done what he had had to do.

"As you have learned," Muriel continued, "the author must choose a viewpoint, a perspective with regard to whose head the reader will reside in. This can change throughout the story, of course, and must be managed to avoid what we learned to call 'head hopping'. But usually as in this case there is one predominant viewpoint and it is generally easier for the reader to empathize with that person. But this is a lesson I think we should all take from this exercise that Mr. McMann has provided. The first person is not always the *best* person. In fact he may not even be a *good* person and yet serves the author's purpose of revealing some truth about human nature. In this case Bruce Mason is an egocentric self-indulgent prick."

The class laughs but Brian finds he cannot join in their mirth.

"There are characters in literature just as there are in real life who consider themselves good people but are not. Only the discerning will ever realize this and not be intimidated by them. In Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Farfrae is presented as an ideal person, successful in everything he endeavors. He is charitable to those to whom he should be charitable. But is he really a good person? I think not. He is incapable of empathy. You will meet people in your life like that and it is good that literature helps us identify people who will refuse to help if the only reason is that you need it."

The bell rings and Brian rises when the students begin to leave their seats. Reaching the door with several other students pushing ahead of him he hears Muriel's final benediction.

"In fact Bruce Mason is so bad that he forced a master of prose to abandon the proper execution of his craft, which perhaps was the most effective way for Stegner to express the extent of his contempt – never mind the fact that this is an autobiographical novel."

As Brian rode to the airport he fumed. He had not realized how vindictive she could be. She had told her class that he was successful, but had not attempted to promote his latest book, hadn't even mentioned it. All he had tried to do was help. The bitch.

