

Argument with Myself On How To Write A Competent Essay

by Scott Loring Sanders

After fourteen years, the cherry tree has died. It was a gift from my wife, celebrating six months of sobriety. A kind gesture, one that always meant more to me than she knew. Every time I'd mow around it, I'd think about how I was still sober. Usually the thought only lasted a few seconds, though occasionally I'd get lost and reflect. On my last night as a hopeless drunk, I pounded twenty-eight beers. By myself. The tree lived fourteen years. Fourteen is half of twenty-eight which

Okay, seriously? Fourteen is half of twenty-eight? Cut everything except the first two lines.

What's wrong with it? I planned to explore how I struggled with alcohol for half my life.

Jesus, that's awful.

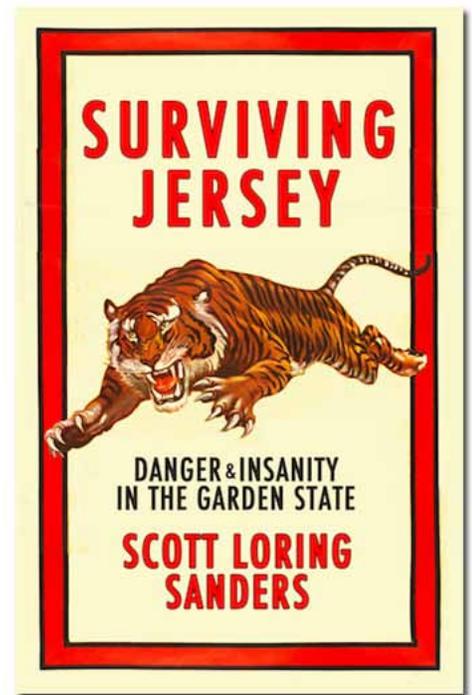
What do you mean? Too maudlin?

It's a prime example of a shallow writer trying to make ridiculous, nonexistent connections that are supposed to have some "deeper meaning, man." Lose the Zen or feng shui or whatever the hell and just tell the story. And maudlin? Really? What an asshole-ish word.

I'm sad when I look at that dead tree now because it was a simple reminder of how my life had improved. But a disease invaded, which is fitting

Let me guess. Alcoholism is a disease? It's hereditary? Every branch of your family tree has been touched by it; all your roots are soaked in alcohol?

Too cliché? Okay, how about this? I joked with my wife that maybe the tree's demise meant I could start drinking again. (Part of me wanted that to be true. Any excuse to drink, even after all this time, still lingers somewhere deep within.) To my surprise she said, "If you think you can handle it..." (Permission. It was an opening which my inner-demon—a demon who never quite died—pounced on immediately. What if? Maybe just one or two? It'd be nice to have a cold beer occasionally) "...but it's probably not worth chancing," she finished. And the little demon went dormant, stuffed back into its dark hole. Until the next test. So I plan to cut down the tree soon, burn it in the woodstove. It'll keep my family warm for a night... That's good, right? There must be a connection, some sort of ironic symbolism? Burning the devil who's haunted me or something?



Scott Loring Sanders has had short fiction and nonfiction widely published and anthologized, including work selected for Best American Mystery Stories and chosen as Notable in Best American Essays. Sanders has published two novels, a collection of short fiction, and was the Writer-in-Residence at the Camargo Foundation in Cassis, France. *Surviving Jersey* is his first book of nonfiction.

Oh, puke. Is George Washington next? Can't chop down a cherry tree without giving him a shout-out.

Well, actually, the whole "never tell a lie" motif was a consideration. I mean, I lived a lie ever since that first drink—

You're really going there? Damn, we almost made it through this essay without that trite comparison. You hate authors who blatantly pull at your heartstrings. You want to punch them. Don't be a douchebag.

You know, I'm glad that word's back in the vernacular.

What word?

Douchebag.

On this we agree.

Remember as kids, in the late 70s, back in Jersey? We used it constantly. Had no idea what it meant—and to this day, I've still never actually seen one—but man, what a word. Then it disappeared for thirty years. Now it's back.

Maybe douchebag is cyclical, like fashion.

Yeah, maybe. Remember when the vet advised, after the dog got sprayed by a skunk, that a douche was the best remedy?

Sure, but remind me again how that's remotely pertinent to this essay?

It's a cool aside.

Cut it. Your brain wanders when you write.

I'm keeping it.

Just tell the story.

I got sober. My wife bought a cherry tree to mark my six month milestone. I was still foggy then, angry and bitter, struggling, but the gesture was kind. Fourteen years later, the tree has died, the leaves withered, the bark split and peeling like old paint. I pondered the significance, tried to impart some



deeper meaning, but in reality it was just a dead tree. I don't need it to remind me of my progress. Every day is a reminder: no hangover, a clear world, life is great. Tomorrow I'll cut it and burn it in the woodstove. When I feel that warmth, maybe I'll have a brief internal ceremony. Perhaps a second of reflection. Say, "Good job, dude" and that will be that. I'll go upstairs and watch college football. If I get real crazy, I might even crack open a ginger ale. Then I'll start a pot of chili or stew. Something hearty for a cold November evening. Mayb

Stop. Less is more.

This?

Learn when something's finished.

It's only 750 words.

Precisely.



Scott Loring Sanders
**Surviving Jersey: Danger & Insanity
in The Garden State**

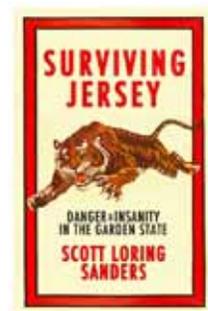
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