

Start it over

If you like stories that begin with a line like —His abundant hair was the colour of black olives, or —Some time ago I became chilled in bed and have not yet gotten over it, or even —My birth happened amidst turmoil but not fanfare, as my mother, unable to make it to the village doctor, expelled me between the stalls of a fishmonger and a fruit-seller, then this isn't the novel for you. This is going to be about a man named Joe, beneficiary of an inheritance, who landed in Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island, in the spring of 2007. He could have been placed anywhere, but the conceit is that he's removing himself, first, from another Atlantic province, but he can't be too far away from the ocean due to nostalgia (this you'll have sympathy with, since everyone misses something), and second, that he has to be a stranger somewhere so that he can experience the usual string of clichéd adventures. So he's in Charlottetown for no good reason, but not for any bad reasons either. You anticipate he will be shown to change over time because you want to regard this as a coming-of-age novel or a quest or one of those made-up categories teachers of fiction stuff novels into.

There's not going to be much here to convince you that you're in some version of the 'real world.' The narrator is intrusive. Things are told, not shown. Everything's so open-ended you'll come to believe you could write this yourself. (But I collect the royalties.) Because, of course, you write. Diary, journal, in memoriams to dead horsies, you write a little, and chances are you show it to a long-suffering friend. Who has to find one good thing to say about it.

Joe—named that out of respect for Henry Miller, whose first published novel has people calling each other Joe so no one takes himself too seriously—Joe is freshly here, in C-town as it's called by the citizens, living in a rented room downtown, without friends yet, but I'm only a few lines in. There are pages to go and this right here is invention, hopefully to be followed by more invention. Did you feel the electricity in those last two lines? I repositioned a dictionary halfway through but never missed the beat. Joe could be about to live a life like yours: the struggle of man versus man, man versus himself, and man versus the environment sort of thing. An Odyssey life in an Iliad world. I've not decided.

A brother would be a useful creature for Joe to have, so he has four, and three sisters while I'm at it. Even more useful is that one brother, Sam, is dead. Sam decided after much consideration that his ex-wife wasn't going to be included in the insurance policy he had with his company, so he changed the beneficiary's name to Joe, and never thought about his only child, a son named—well, you name him. This son, _____, certainly was screwed by Dad's forgetfulness. When the load of steel fell on Sam, who was in management, not just a labourer making a labourer's salary, and really shouldn't have been on site, that signalled the enrichment of the one brother he thought most deserved, and could best handle, thousands of dollars. A good uncle would have given the money to _____, and Joe did drop some into a trust fund, but he hadn't liked the ex-wife either, and maybe had bad memories about the wedding. Let's see what they were. Okay, I can say that he hated the brown-checked suit his parents dressed him in on Sam's marriage day, that he was completely unprepared for the wedding ceremony itself, and yet he knew that his relationship with his brother, older and etc. who had been close to him, had changed forever. So he cried all the way up the aisle as his family made their way out of the over-lit Presbyterian church. People saw him cry, no one said anything, but he hated having done that without understanding why. He asked himself why he cried then for years after. He knew why he cried when his brother was buried, but that was little consolation for the blank spot in his memory. (There will be lots of blank spots. Feel free to pitch in, supply motivations, bring things

from the dark, dull and brightly coloured corners of your internal life.) Cry, cry, cry. Then came the news, —Hey, you got money from this tragedy, though expressed in the refined language of the law, and there were pleas to give the money to the child, and to the ex-wife because with her extinguished alimony payments she could possibly be bereft. Joe resisted. Bully for Joe.

Joe takes the money, gives out a tiny bit as I said, suffers, worries, recovers his nerve, packs, leaves. Leaves the hated hillside city where he lived for most of his life—C-town is flat, so there's a good contrast; you can see there's craft here, even if I don't appear to give a damn—because he felt confined, too well known, it was claustrophobic, and for whatever reason you left where you were from (except pregnancy), and decides that his money, which is a lot by atlantic canada standards, can best support him in a place that is close to family but not too close. He finds a place to live, to start over, to begin actually, since the novel did almost have “this is going to be about a man named Joe who landed in charlottetown, prince edward island in the spring of 2007” as the opening line. What follows is what followed his move.