

A writer's office may be small and richly cluttered, or light and well organized; it may be splendidly equipped with the paraphernalia of modern communications, or simple and monastic with just a desk and a chair. The important thing is that *no one comes into it uninvited*. A writer of fiction must conjure up imaginary people and plot courses of events which have no existence in fact, and yet, at least while doing so, believe in them, and in order for the imaginary world to flourish, the actual world must (at least for a few hours at a time) be kept at bay. Writers are both passionate and strict about their offices. Marcel Proust, for example, lined his study with cork to insulate himself from the world. Virginia Woolf used the title A Room of One's Own for her essay about the needs of women writers.

My office is on the top floor of the house. Windows look over gardens and treetops; there are books along one wall, a fireplace, and a photograph of the Earth seen from Apollo 10. Its one disadvantage is that it is in my home. This means that I have to discipline myself to disregard whatever is happening or might need doing downstairs in order to get up to it: although hard, this can be done. It also means that the carpenters, plumbers and other noisy tradespersons often needed to deal with an old and previously neglected house must be organised so as to be here when I am not trying to work. This, it seems, is impossible, and so here I sit on a Monday morning, ready to explode.

Ken and Michael, the decorators, who failed to come two weeks ago, when we were on holiday, and failed to come again last week, when I was researching media coverage of the moon landing in the British Library, arrived at 8 a.m. They will be working in the kitchen on the stairs and on both landings. I explained about writers and their offices, how very passionate they feel on the subject. I really shouldn't worry, Michael said, rubbing the greying stubble on his chin. Really, he said, I wouldn't know they were here! Meanwhile they were desperate for a cup of tea.

When I entered my office, there was a large, sheet-covered pile of kitchen cupboards in the middle of it. I squeezed past, sat resolutely at the desk. I told myself not to be fussy about the muffled thumps and curses from downstairs and attempted to think myself back into the part of my novel concerning the disappearance of the red-haired girl, Natalie, who was crossing a field at dawn last time I wrote about her... She has been up all night, watching the moon landing on television and is trying to find her way back to the campsite. Meanwhile -

Michael knocks. He wants me to come and take a look at the plaster work on the first landing. It's *shot*, he says. What should he do about it? I, being a writer, don't know. He phones his boss, then abandons the lower landing and sets about sandpapering the cupboard doors on my landing. This is not a bad sound, rhythmical, steady, though he does keep interrupting it to cough, or mutter to

himself.

Half an hour passes, during which I manage a paragraph or so of Natalie's thoughts as she crosses the field. I'm about to cut back to the campsite, when Ken shouts for me from the bottom of the stairs. I thread myself past ladders and trestles, descend cautiously to ground level. Whereas Michael is potato-round and softly spoken, Ken is thin and has an aggressive bark of a voice. Should the tiles go this way or that way around the window? This way? I guess. You're a writer! he states, putting the tiles down, folding his arms across his chest, leaning against the wall. I think I know what's coming next, and I'm right: he has had a very interesting life and he is sure it could be turned into a book. For example...

Forty minutes later, fully informed about Ken's birth by caesarean section, the family's various moves around the country and their brief emigration to Australia, his father's collection of model airplanes, his own period of fantastic wealth in the nineteen-eighties, the band he plays in, his recent failed attempt to set up a computer business, his wife's exercise regime, his father's death and his children's problems at school, I manage to extricate myself in order to answer the doorbell. It's fast-talking, barrel-chested Gary, the Boss.

Since I last saw him three days ago, Gary has severed three of his fingertips during an attempt to adjust a lawnmower while the blade was still moving. These fingertips have been re-attached by microsurgery. One has a steel pin through the top, which, he informs me with relish, keeps catching on the indicator stick when he is driving. Sensation has returned to the fingers. He wiggles them. We examine them in detail. They are a kind of purplish black; the skin is flaking and the nails have fallen off, but, he assures me, they are doing very well. We proceed to the plaster work, examine that in much the same way and negotiate a price. I leave him and Michael arguing on the stairs and return to the office.

The point of Natalie's journey through the field eludes me and I'm finding it quite hard to even remember the names of my own characters, so I put on some music to drown out the voices, abandon the computer and write the names of my characters on a big sheet of paper, with arrows indicating the important relationships. This seems to work. I feel I'm on the verge of having an idea for the climax of the scene *after* the one in the field but then, Gary pushes the door open without knocking.

Sorry, I forgot, he says. With all that extra work, I better warn you that we'll have to go well into next week.

No, I tell him. *Please*. Gary likes *please*. As a favour, he says, he'll see if he can get an extra hand. The moment Gary leaves the house, Michael knocks. He waits for me to come out and stand on the dim, sheet-shrouded landing where he tells me how he has been twenty years in the trade. He tells me about his unfair

dismissal from the top decorating firm in the country. Things in the industry are going downhill. Bosses like Gary are just in it for the money and don't listen when told of the problems involved in doing a job properly. So – he'll be honest with me - Michael now never pushes himself on a job and does only what he's paid for, no extras, no initiative. This has reduced the stress on him and revolutionised his life. He recently got married, and tells me about the fantastic honeymoon he and his wife enjoyed in Tenerife. There will be a bit of noise he says, while he knocks the plaster down ...

There is not only noise, but also a vibration rising through the floor and the desk itself with each irregularly timed blow. The computer screen starts to flicker. I turn the machine off, gather up my pieces of paper, blunder coughing through the dust filled staircase and out into the garden. Unfortunately Ken is now working on the back door. What do I think of Jeffrey Archer? Of Iain Banks? Could he borrow a large cooking pot to heat up his lunch? He has certain firm beliefs about healthy nutrition, the balance of proteins and vitamins, which he explains in depth and then, never one to be left out, Michael descends to the garden to eat his lunch too. He takes his vest off to catch the sun while he eats, revealing a huge pasty white stomach. He enumerates, in intricate detail, his plans for the afternoon and the reasons for doing things in the order he has chosen. Unfortunately there will be a period of several hours during which I can't go up or downstairs. It can't be helped. I must choose, office or garden.

There are books in the office, so I go to the kitchen, fill my water jug, and manage to squeeze past Michael on his first landing camp with only a short explanation of the science involved in the setting of plaster.

I blow the dust from my desk, drink some water and for five minutes or so I feel it is possible that I might go better than just reading, and do something low key, such as edit a previous chapter. I fiddle with the dialogue in the scene where Barbara combs Natalie's hair. I want this simple act to suggest all of the longing Barbara feels for the daughter she lost many years ago... I want her to realise - abruptly Michael stops singing to himself. I hear him yell down his mobile to Charlene, his wife. He comes up to tell me that she has passed her physiotherapy exams. Congratulations!

I drink more water and stare at the picture of the earth seen from Apollo 10.... A *spaceship* office would suit me fine, I'm thinking, when Michael knocks again, requiring me to come down and praise the completed plastering. He explains how he will vacuum the stairs and then undercoat the gloss paint on the banisters. When I come out of the bathroom, my way back up is blocked by the vacuuming. I go down instead.

The front door is open and Ken is sitting on the front step, talking to a very old man,

a trim, upright type, bright-eyed, with a grizzled terrier panting on a lead. You must listen to this! Ken tells me. This is Bill, he's one of only eight survivors of the battle of Arnhem! And indeed, Bill has a medal in his pocket to prove it and also a photograph of himself shaking the Queen's hand in 1995. For my benefit, Bill tells the whole story again, including his escape from interrogation in the Sudetenland, his recapture, a second escape via Belgium, his eventual return to his family who had been told he was dead. He salutes us and departs. *There's something you could write about,* Ken says, triumphant.

In the kitchen, I find a lumbering bald-headed man with red-rimmed eyes sitting at the table drinking inky black coffee from a flask: Derek. Gary sent him to help the other two, he says, offering his hand to shake. Soon begins the inevitable monologue: a riches-to-rags tale. I learn that not long ago Derek had two yachts, three classic cars, gold bath taps and a top model for his girlfriend! But now all that's left is the six-bedroom house, snatched from the jaws of repossession. He plans to go into partnership with Gary and split it up into student bedsits. He sketches a plan of the conversion for me on his sandwich wrapper.

At this point, there's a pause: pure, delicious silence. No vacuuming. No hammering. No barking voice. I take a step towards the door. Lurching to his feet, Derek closes the distance between us. He takes my hand in his, looks into my eyes and announces that he feels he must be honest. He wants me to know that this is his first day back at work after a two year stay in a psychiatric unit. He heard a voice in his head telling him to do things. But that's all over now and it can happen to anyone, he says - and regarding this, I am sure he is correct, because forget the girl with the red hair, forget Barbara, the moon landing in 1969, forget whether to have a semi colon or a full stop, all that. There is a very loud voice in my head and it says: 'A *room* of your own? Bollocks. You need an office that is separate from the house.' I push past Derek and stumble up the stairs to write it down.