

Cutting 'Distance': A note on three versions of Raymond Carver's short story

William Green

1. Introduction

In recent years there has been some controversy over Raymond Carver's third book of short stories, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*. According to Carver's biographer, Carol Sklenicka, there were three versions of the collection: A, B and C. The manuscript that Carver originally submitted for publication was Version A; Version B was the first amended manuscript that Carver's editor, Gordon Lish, returned to him. Lish had made a number of changes, amongst which the title of the story 'Beginners' had been changed to 'What We Talk About When We Talk About Love', which had also become the title of the collection. Carver was disturbed by this, Sklenicka notes, but he signed a contract in 1980 to have the book published. Shortly afterwards, Version C arrived from Lish. This version had been heavily edited with long sections deleted and others rewritten by Lish. Over fifty per cent of the original manuscript had been cut. As Sklenicka writes, '[Carver] had urged Lish to take a pencil to the stories. He had not expected a meat cleaver.' Carver begged Lish to return the manuscript to Version B:

I'm afraid, mortally afraid, I feel it, that if the book were to be published as it is in its present edited form, I may never write another story, that's how closely, God forbid, some of those stories are to my sense of regaining my health and mental well-being. . . (Carver, 2007)

Carver felt that the stories had played an important part in his recovery from alcoholism only three years before, and he regarded the heavy editing as an assault on his new-found health and self-confidence. Lish, however, refused to return to Version B, and because he had signed the contract, Carver had to accept the publication of Version C, as *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (1981).

The original Version A has now been recovered from Carver's manuscripts, and published as *Beginners* (2009). Included in this collection is a story called 'Distance'. A much shortened version of this story was published in *WWTA* with the title 'Everything Stuck To Him' (ESTH), and there is a third version that Carver approved for his *Selected Stories* (Carver, 1993). This final version was the one that I analysed in an earlier article (Green, 2000). In this paper I will examine some of the differences between the three versions of the story. I will attempt to show what effects the changes had on the final version of the story.

For the sake of brevity, in what follows I will abbreviate the version of 'Distance' in the *Beginners* collection as BD, the version in *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* as ESTH, and the final version from *Where I'm Calling From: The Selected Stories*, as SD. The page references are to the paperback version of *Beginners*, (Carver, 2010), 'Everything Stuck To Him' in Carver (2009), and the final version in Carver (1993).

In Sections 2, 3 and 4 I will deal with some differences between the original manuscript BD, and Carver's final version, SD. Some of these changes were made by Gordon Lish and included in ESTH, but as Carver adopted them for his final version I will not confuse matters further by differentiating between Carver's edits and Lish's. In the remainder of the paper I will look at BD and ESTH, focusing on some of the major cuts that Lish made to the original manuscript.

2. The frame story

The main story is about a young couple ('the boy' and 'the girl') with a new baby. It relates an episode in which the couple fight over the boy's decision to go hunting even though his baby daughter is ill and the girl - his wife - is worried about her. This episode is told twenty years later by 'the boy' (now living in Italy, and presumably in his late 30s) to his grown-up daughter, who was the baby of the main story. The main story is thus framed by the events and conversation between the father and his grown-up daughter.

The relationship between the two characters in the frame story is more explicit in BD: 'The father is proud of her, pleased and grateful she has passed safely through her adolescence into young womanhood.' (BD: 167). This sentence is replaced in SD with 'A survivor from top to bottom.' (SD: 151). Not only does this make the relationship less clear but it also removes some of its warmth, the father's concern about, and pride in, his daughter. The use of 'survivor' also brings a suggestion of hardship in the daughter's life to SD which is not present in BD. This change to a cooler relationship is also found later in the frame story. The father asks, 'I could tell you something about when you were a baby. Do you want to hear about their first real argument? It involves you, he says, and smiles at her.' (BD: 167) However, in SD this is reduced to: 'I could tell you something about when you were a baby. It involves you, he says. But only in a minor way.' In this edit, the smile of the original is removed, the daughter's role is lessened, and the explicit description of 'their first real argument' is also deleted. The celebrated dictum of creative writing classes, 'show, don't tell' is here embodied. This may also be the reason for the editing of the daughter's response, from 'Tell me, she says, and claps her hands in anticipation.' in BD (*ibid.*), to just 'Tell me, she says.' in SD. Again, the effect of this cut

is to remove a display of emotion, resulting in a somewhat colder atmosphere in the passage.

Once the father has started his story in SD there is no further reference to the frame story until the end. However, in BD the frame story is interposed in the main story, when the father asks his daughter:

Are you still with me?

I am, she says. A nice arrangement for everyone, dentist included.

That's right, he says. Except when the dentist found out they were using his personal letterhead stationery for their personal correspondence. But that's another story. (BD: 167-168)

This passage spells out the reason for its own deletion: it is extraneous to the story. This type of editing occurs elsewhere, for example, when the girl's sister is mentioned, the father addresses his grown-up daughter again ('you' in this extract):

Claire was the girl's sister, ten years older. She was a striking woman. I don't know if you've seen pictures of her. (She hemorrhaged to death in a hotel in Seattle when you were about four.) The boy was a little in love with her... (BD: 169)

In SD, this passage is edited to: 'Sally was the girl's sister. She was ten years older. The boy was a little in love with her...' This avoids interposing more of the frame into the main story, and also cuts 'another story'. Especially as this other story sounds rather more exciting than the one the father is telling, the edit successfully enhances the focus on the main story.

The frame story in SD is thus confined to the beginning and end of the short story, and once the main story has been begun the frame does not interrupt it. In addition, the relationship between the father and daughter is made somewhat cooler than in BD and the relationship between the two characters of the frame story and the characters of the main story is made less explicit, although still fully recoverable.

3. Carl's character

Carl was a friend of the boy's dead father and the boy and Carl are hunting friends. It is the planned hunting trip with Carl that causes the argument between the boy and the girl. In BD Carl is a more sympathetic character than in SD, in which he is rather more self-absorbed. In this section I will explore how this effect is achieved.

In the phone call in which they arrange the shooting trip, Carl congratulates the boy on his new baby, and asks after his wife's health. Once he has been reassured that everyone is fine, he begins to talk about hunting. The boy says that he wants to go, and Carl responds:

You be here at five thirty then and we'll go, Carl said. Bring lots of shells. We'll get some shooting in all right, don't worry. I'll see you in the morning. (BD: 168)

In SD, this passage is amended thus:

You be here at five thirty sharp and we'll go, Carl said. Bring lots of shells. We'll get some shooting in all right. I'll see you in the morning. (SD: 152)

The change of adverb from 'then' to 'sharp' suggests that there is an authoritarian edge to Carl's character. The reassurance 'don't worry' indicates warmth and compassion; its deletion in SD makes Carl a somewhat colder character. His appearance is also modified, from 'a bluff, heavysset, balding man' (BD: 168-169) to 'a lean, balding man'.

When the boy arrives at Carl's house, Carl tells him:

I'm all ready, just let me hit the lights. I feel like hell, I really do, he went on. I thought maybe you had overslept so I just this minute finished calling your place. Your wife said you had left. I feel like hell calling. (BD: 173)

In this extract from BD it is clear that Carl is feeling guilty about having called the boy's wife so early in the morning and woken her up. In SD the causality between the phone call and Carl's state of mind is obscured. The SD version reads:

I'm ready, just let me hit the lights. I feel like hell, I really do, he went on. I thought maybe you had overslept so I just this minute called your place. Your wife said you had left. I feel like hell. (SD: 157)

These edits introduce some ambiguity to the passage; it is possible to imagine Carl feeling bad because he didn't get enough sleep or because he drank too much the night before. Carl becomes a less sympathetic figure as a result of this change. Yet he still demonstrates that he is a compassionate man, telling the boy that he need not have driven over to tell Carl that he could not go hunting, and then, as the boy is leaving: 'So long, Carl said. Hey, don't let anybody ever tell you otherwise, Carl called after him.

You're a lucky boy and I mean that.' (BD: 174). So it seems that in the unedited sections Carl is quite a warm, compassionate man. The edits analysed here seem designed to reduce these qualities and make him more self-centred and cold.

4. Emotion and neutral verbs

In Section 2 above, I noted how some of the warm emotion between the father and daughter is removed in the edited SD version. The father's smile and the daughter's excited anticipation of the story are both deleted. In addition, when the father seems to be distracted from telling the story by something in the street that he sees from the window, his daughter's 'Tell the story, she reminds gently' (BD: 168) is changed to 'Tell the story, she says.' (SD: 152). There are two points here: first, the verb is replaced by the more neutral 'says' and second, the adverb of manner is removed entirely. The adverb's omission again reduces the warmth in the relationship between father and daughter. In the main story similar edits can be found. For example, when the baby appears to be ill and has been crying for a long time, the boy picks her up. 'The baby kicked its feet and smiled' (BD: 171-172) is changed to 'The baby kicked its feet and was quiet.' The boy insists on going hunting even though the girl has said she thinks that he shouldn't go. He argues that Carl is expecting him, that they have planned the trip: 'I don't give a damn about what you and Carl have planned, she flared. And I don't give a damn about Carl either.' (p. 172). In SD, 'flared' is replaced with the neutral 'said'. In both these examples, emotion in the narrative is neutralized.

This characteristic is found in larger edits as well. After the boy has arranged the hunting trip with Carl on the phone:

The boy hung up the telephone and went downstairs to tell the girl about going hunting the next morning. He was happy about going hunting, and he laid out his things a few minutes later: hunting coat... (BD: 169)

In SD, this is amended to: 'The boy hung up the telephone and went downstairs to tell the girl. She watched while he laid out his things. Hunting coat...' (SD: 153). The boy's happiness at the prospect of the hunting trip is deleted, again giving the narrative a more neutral stance. Similarly, in the argument between the boy and the girl, the narrative line 'Her voice had an edginess that caused the boy to look at her closely.' (BD: 172) is cut completely. Two of the girl's lines are also cut: 'If you weren't being selfish you'd realize that.' (ibid.), and 'If you go out that door you're not coming back, I'm serious.' (BD: 173). Particularly, the first of these returns us to the writer's dictum, 'show, don't tell'. The girl's accusation is an explicit description of the boy's behaviour and is redundant in that we can infer it from the situation and his response to it.

5. Final paragraph

The final paragraphs of the two versions (BD and SD) are very different and I include them here in order to facilitate the discussion.

BD: But he continues to stand at the window, remembering that gone life. After that morning there would be those hard times ahead, other women for him and another man for her, but that morning, that particular morning, they had danced. They danced, and then they held to each other as if there would always be that morning, and later they laughed about the waffle. They leaned on each other and laughed about it until tears

came, while outside everything froze, for a while anyway. (BD: 176)

SD: But he stays by the window, remembering that life. They had laughed. They had leaned on each other and laughed until the tears had come, while everything else – the cold and where he'd go in it – was outside, for a while anyway. (SD: 160)

The effects of the changes that I have noted above in Sections 2-4 are also to be found in the final paragraph of the story. Extraneous material is cut, for example, the reference to other men and women; emotion is reduced and/or neutralized, for example, the dancing is cut (although the laughter is allowed to remain); and finally, the SD version emphasizes the cold, which as we have seen has been intensified by a number of other edits to the text.

6. 'Everything Stuck To Him'

Carver's editor, Gordon Lish, cut about forty-five per cent of the original manuscript to make the version published in *WWTA*, 'Everything Stuck To Him'. Here I will focus on the effects of some of these changes.

I will begin with some smaller details of the type that I analysed in my earlier paper. These, I think, demonstrate Carver's mastery of dialogue and representation of relationships. When the baby is sick but the boy starts getting ready to go hunting, the couple have the following conversation:

What are you doing? the girl said to him.

Going hunting, he said.

I don't think you should, she said. Maybe you could go later

on in the day if the baby is all right then, but I don't think you should go this morning. I don't want to be left alone with her like this.

Carl's planning on me going, the boy said. We've planned it.

I don't give a damn about what you and Carl have planned, she flared. And I don't give a damn about Carl either. I don't even know the man. I don't want you to go is all. I don't think you should even consider wanting to go under the circumstances.

You've met Carl before, you know him, the boy said. What do you mean you don't know him?

That's not the point and you know it, the girl said. The point is I don't intend to be left alone with a sick baby. If you weren't being selfish you'd realize that. (BD: 172)

I have noted some of the changes made to this passage for the final version, but here I want to compare it with Lish's version, ESTH.

What are you doing? the girl said.

Going hunting, the boy said.

I don't think you should, she said. I don't want to be left alone with her like this.

Carl's planning on me going, the boy said. We've planned it.

I don't care about what you and Carl have planned, she said. And I don't care about Carl, either. I don't even know Carl.

You've met Carl before. You know him, the boy said. What do you mean you don't know him?

That's not the point and you know it, the girl said.

What is the point? the boy said. The point is we planned it. (ESTH: 307)

In Lish's version the cohesion between the characters' turns in this quotation is straightforward, the boy referring back to the girl's immediately preceding statement in his last two turns. However, Carver's original version is more interesting in that the boy skips back over two of the girl's sentences that express opposition to his hunting trip ('I don't want you to go is all. I don't think you should even consider wanting to go under the circumstances.') in order to find fault with the factual statement, 'I don't even know the man.' Ignoring the girl's justified opposition in this way and attacking the factual error seems to me a well-observed moment, and a far more revealing exchange than Lish's amended version.

In my earlier paper, I noted that the girl adopts the boy's idiolect in the reconciliation scene, specifically his use of 'sounds' (as in 'That sounds like a good idea'), asking him, 'How does a waffle sound with this bacon?' to which he responds, 'Sounds great'. In the same conversation I also noted the use of demonstrative determiners, the boy prefixing two of the four nouns he uses with 'this': 'this bacon' and 'this pan'. The girl uses the same structure four times: 'those things', 'this breakfast', 'this bacon' and 'that one'. I argued that this use of demonstrative determiners is 'a method of cohesion not only between language and specific physical referent, but between characters' (Green 2000: 11). For example, in describing the baby as 'that one' the deictic distances the couple from the baby and positions them together in the same space, for a moment excluding the baby and affirming their identity as a couple. In Lish's edited version, ESTH, all of these demonstrative determiners are lost in his cuts, thus to my mind seriously diminishing the subtlety of the reconciliation scene, which is rendered thus:

Hey, the boy said.

I'm sorry, the girl said.

It's all right, the boy said.

I didn't mean to snap like that.

It was my fault, he said.

You sit down, the girl said. How does a waffle sound with bacon?

Sounds great, the boy said. (ESTH: 308)

It is also interesting (and gratifying) to note that in Carver's final version he changed 'You sit down, the girl said. I'll fix the breakfast. How does a waffle sound with this bacon?' (BD: 175) to 'You sit down, the girl said. I'll fix this breakfast. How does a waffle sound with this bacon?' (SD: 158), thus increasing the number of demonstrative determiners and adding to the effect that I have described here.

Carl's role is greatly reduced in ESTH. The description of him in the other two versions, discussed above, is cut. Carl is merely 'an old hunting friend of his father's'. His role in the plot is maintained of course, in that the cause of the argument is the hunting trip that the boy organizes with him. However, in ESTH, the boy does not drive to Carl's house at all; he just sits in the car outside his apartment and then goes back in, having decided not to go hunting. This means that the following passage is omitted:

The temperature had dropped during the night, but the weather had cleared so that the stars had come out, and now they gleamed in the sky over his head. Driving, the boy glanced up once at the stars and was moved when he considered their bright distance. (BD: 173)

The 'distance' that is here deleted by Lish gives the story its name (which is, presumably, why it had to be renamed) but it also provides a parallel to the distance in the relationship between the boy and girl, and the father and daughter in the frame story. The importance of this passage is further emphasized by Carver's amendments to the final version: '...the stars had come out. The stars gleamed in the sky over his head. Driving, the boy looked out at the stars and was moved when he considered their distance.' (SD: 157). Rather than the cursory 'glanced up once' there is the more concentrated 'looked out at', in keeping with the boy's emotional response, and the stars' distance stands alone, without its original modifier.

This is not the only passage that provides a parallel to the main story. The couple have a conversation about the girl's sister, to whom the boy is attracted, but he confirms that he loves only his wife:

And will we always love each other? the girl asked, enormously enjoying this conversation, he could tell.

Always, the boy said. And we'll always be together. We're like the Canadian geese, he said, taking the first comparison that came to mind, for they were often in his mind in those days. They only marry once. They choose a mate early in life, and then the two of them stay together always. If one of them dies or something the other one will never remarry. (BD: 170)

The couple's conversation continues with the girl asking, 'Have you ever killed one of those marriages? You know what I mean' (ibid.) and the boy describing how he has sometimes killed a goose and seen its mate turn back to look for it. He concludes, 'I love everything there is about hunting geese. And I love to just watch

them even when I'm not hunting them. But there are all kinds of contradictions in life. You can't think about all the contradictions.' (ibid.). This other marriage and its death brings a powerful sense of foreboding to the story and the couple's own marriage. It may be that Lish felt that the parallelism was rather heavy-handed and thus cut the entire passage. In SD, Carver includes the passage but makes a number of changes that function to tone down the correspondence slightly, for example, by omitting the word 'marriage' from the girl's question above, and by deleting the word 'hunting' from the boy's speech quoted above.

7. Conclusion

It has been seen that the changes made between BD and SD removed extraneous material, focusing more closely on the main story. In addition, expressions of emotion in the narrative are often reduced and/or neutralized. The SD version also has a number of edits that emphasize the cold. Changes to the conversation between the boy and girl analysed in the last section evince Carver's close attention to detail in presenting character through dialogue. Lish's edits to the original manuscript as described here removed two parallel narrative strands, to my mind impoverishing the story.

It has taken many years for the original versions of the stories in Carver's *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* to be published, but it is clear from the passages analysed in this short article that it has been worth the wait. The differences between the versions of his stories shed light on the processes of composition and editing, and in particular illuminate the subtlety in Carver's representation of dialogue.

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