

ALICE DROPS HER CIGARETTE ON THE FLOOR . . .

*(William Whitehead looking over Timothy
Findley's shoulder)*

Timothy Findley

THE HARDEST THING OF ALL to write about is yourself.

For one thing — if you're a fiction writer — most of you is already out there, somewhere; chopped up in little bits and hidden (or not hidden) in your books. Fragments. Not that you've put yourself there consciously. But your energy is there. Something of your own character — something of your own makeup goes into the character and makeup of everyone you write. And the rest of you is private. Mostly. So obliquely private that it's very hard to get at. Especially if you yourself are the questioner.

The thing is, everything you ask yourself — or very nearly everything — already has an answer that doesn't interest you. It would interest you about someone else — but not about yourself. "When were you born?" "1930." "Where?" "Toronto. What a stupid question. . . . I mean, you already know all this." "Are you happy?" "Don't be silly. If I was happy, would I be sitting here worried to death about how to write this article? It's already two months overdue and you're asking me when I was born. What a twit you are."

So it goes.

In the end, you lose your respect: both for yourself as a character worthy of interest and as an interviewer. And who needs that? No one. But when I put the problem to my friend Bill Whitehead, his answer was both succinct and a god-send. "You don't know how to ask yourself the right questions," he said. "Let me do it for you." "You mean the way Gertrude Stein wrote the *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*?" "No," he said. "I mean the way you write all your books. I will be you — and ask the questions: and you will be a character — and give the answers."

Oh.

Which is how I discovered the Art of Writing Fiction. You ask the right questions. But, in order to ask the right questions, you have to be asking them of

someone who inherently interests you more than you can possibly interest yourself. And thus — what follows.

THE INTERVIEW TOOK PLACE in a sunny room on a cold, bright autumn afternoon. The Interviewer was William Whitehead — a documentary writer for television. The person being interviewed was Timothy Findley — a fiction writer and playwright. The Interviewer had a touch of the 'flu — so the questions were interspersed with coughs and wheezes. Out in the larger world beyond the room, the President of Egypt had been shot: and in the smaller world beyond the room, the fiction writer was about to publish the fourth of his novels. As a consequence of both these events — and of the 'flu and of the golden leaves that blew across the fading lawn, there was an over-riding sense of tension in the room and an undercurrent of wonder that horror and discomfort are always walking hand-in-hand through a beautiful landscape.

w.w. Somewhere up in a cupboard, locked away, we have a number of your paintings. This is something you've dabbled with from time to time: something you seem to be drawn to. How is it, then, you've never tried to be a professional painter?

t.f. Because I'm not accomplished enough to do with painting what I would like to do with painting. And I haven't the facility — even with a great deal of study — to do that.

w.w. What is it you would like to do with painting?

t.f. Something enormous. I have visions of huge canvases — not murals — but Stanley Spencer's type of stuff — where there are masses of people in the picture. And they're very colourful. They would be stylized. They would be recordings of events. Or of moments. The visions in my mind are very graphic in that sense. And, when I sit down to paint, I inevitably paint something that is in my mind, rather than something out the window. I'm not inclined to sit down and paint that which is right in front of me. Maybe because what's in front of me satisfies my curiosity: satisfies my sense of wonder in itself. The only time I would paint that which is in front of me would be when I wanted to catch a person in a particular moment of their life — or their day: an *attitude*. I've tried to paint my mother — I've tried to paint my brother — I've tried to paint you. Lots of people. And each of these paintings shows the person in repose of some kind: occupied with something private. And, in each of the paintings, it was not the person's face that attracted my attention — but the attitude of the person who was sitting there. But I'm really not accomplished in this area. Perhaps I have a talent to

see — but I haven't the talent to translate what I see into something on canvas. Or whatever.

w.w. Would you say it was "character" — your interest in character — that drew you to the theatre as an actor?

T.F. Yes. Interest in *attitude*. And by that I mean the physical attitude as much as the intellectual attitude. That's why I got to the theatre through dance: through the gesture: through the way people present themselves. The thing that always moves me most — whether you see a person by himself or people in huge groups — is the concentration of emotion: or lack of it. The *attitude*. And, in the theatre, that has as much to do with what you see as with what you hear. I guess that's why I like Chekhov: because of the famous *pauses* — which he provides so that people can fill out or complete what has been begun with words.

w.w. Is this why you find it so hard to resist the creation of stage directions when you write a play? Because you see so vividly?

T.F. Yes. Even though I know it's dangerous to write too many stage directions: because they can be very limiting so far as the director and the actors are concerned. The first thing Robin Phillips does, for instance, is remove every single stage direction. Nonetheless, I provide them. Because I am always seeing what the people are doing, when I write: as well as hearing what they're saying. I see and hear in tandem. Whereas, a lot of playwrights — and a lot of novelists, too — really only seem to hear their people. The answer, of course, with plays is to put it down for yourself — you know — put down all the stage directions as you write and then excise them from the final draft. Which leaves the movement inherent in the body of the dialogue. This way, the actors will be impelled to move, without knowing why. And, also, be impelled to the moments of stillness. But, in novels, when I'm reading — I find so often the curious sense that what is seen has been written after what has been heard and sort of "tacked on" or pasted into the fabric of the book. As if the writer couldn't see and hear at the same time.

w.w. But how do you sort it out? I mean — if it's simultaneous. Come on, Tiff. You can only put one set of words on paper at a time. . . .

T.F. Well. All right. Look at it this way. In a sense, the writer is a *voyeur*: while, in another sense, he's eavesdropping. He is watching with fascination and — equally — listening or overhearing with fascination. Yes? Now — imagine a scene with a number of people in it and there you are watching it unfold. Watching and listening. And your eyes are sweeping over the whole roomful of people. . . . Yes? You keep track of everyone who is in the scene. Let's say the scene is set at a table and the people are eating a meal. And — you know what it's like when you're at a dinner party and everyone leans out toward the person who is leading

the conversation when suddenly . . . (SNAP) . . . someone at the other end of the table will do something that draws your attention to them. Maybe all they've done is take a sip of wine: but you catch it and you see it from the corner of your eye and the sipping of the wine is there as part of the conversation. So this is what writing is like: for me. Your eye and your ear — your inner eye and your inner ear — are always poised upon the moment. So that whenever there is speech, you hear it and whenever there is gesture, you see it: no matter where it occurs in the room: no matter who it comes from — even if it comes from the mice in the wall or the spider up in the corner over the plate rail. . . .

w.w. Now there's a plate rail. Where did the plate rail come from?

t.f. Well — it's in the scene. But how weird! You seize upon the plate rail when I thought — because you're an entomologist — you'd seize upon the spider.

w.w. What — and throw it out the window?

t.f. No. And talk about it. . . .

w.w. No. I gave all that up years ago.

t.f. Now — you see? We all know a little more about you.

w.w. What about this scene we were in?

t.f. What scene?

w.w. Weren't we at a dinner party?

t.f. Well: we were — but they've gone, now. What were we talking about? Plate rails?

w.w. You — as a writer — being able to see and hear at the same time. Be specific.

t.f. Well: specifically — when I'm writing a scene in which there is more than one person — however many more there may be — I will find myself . . . let us say when George and Brenda are talking: having a terrible argument. . . . I find myself sitting there watching them: listening to them — trying not to interrupt them — fascinated . . . when, all at once, Alice drops her cigarette on the floor. But the focus of the scene — the point of the scene — is the argument between George and Brenda. Now — I don't know how it is that I witnessed Alice dropping her cigarette on the floor. And I don't know *why* I did. I only know I saw it fall and I saw when she let it go — so I make a record of it: ALICE DROPS HER CIGARETTE ON THE FLOOR. Does it matter? Is it an important gesture? Does it tell us anything? Was it a comment on the fact that George was right in the middle of telling Brenda about that thing he's found in the drawer upstairs . . . ? I don't

know. All I know is — the gesture was there and I saw it and I put it down on the paper. But only time and more writing: only the continuation of the writing process is going to tell me whether Alice dropping her cigarette is meaningful. I mean — you know — it could turn out (LAUGHTER) that Alice doesn't even smoke, for God's sake. So what's she doing with this cigarette in the first place?

w.w. Could I ask you something?

t.f. Fire away.

w.w. Who the hell are George and Brenda and Alice?

t.f. I don't know.

w.w. (LAUGHTER)

t.f. Well, I don't. They just arrived. I don't even know their last names. George, Brenda, Alice — this is Bill Whitehead.

w.w. How come you assume they don't need an introduction to you?

t.f. Yes. A very good question. (SILENCE) Uhhmm. . . . The only answer that occurs to me is that — they were in my mind. Sort of like houseguests. So, I assume we know each other. Unless, of course, they're burglars. People very often are, you know — and you have to kick them out.

w.w. Have they gone yet?

t.f. Yes.

w.w. May I continue?

t.f. Yes.

w.w. You don't want to mislead people, you know, about the process of eavesdropping. You make it all sound as if it's terribly easy. As if the process of writing fiction were easy, whereas . . .

t.f. It's not.

w.w. I mean: how do you explain — in terms of "eavesdropping" and *voyeurism* — having to re-write scenes — having to discard chapters — having to create whole new passages? A minute ago you were talking as if all you had to do was "take notes" — and as if the characters were in control of everything. But don't you have to exert some control over *them*?

t.f. Oh, indeed.

w.w. Well — give me a sense of this: as effort. Because I know how hard you work — and I know how much you re-write — and I know how dissatisfied you

always seem to be with what you do. So how do you account for this, in the face of the other: of the characters being in control?

T.F. Well — the effort: the effort on the writer's part is to fulfill the character: to fulfill the story. You know — to do it justice and to get it all right. For instance, the writing of the play, "*Can You See Me, Yet?*" I wrote it all first as a straightforward play about a family: the family of Cassandra Wakelin. And the play all took place in the garden of the Wakelin home. And the family were all there — and the people came and went and the story unfolded and, to some degree, the play succeeded. On the other hand — in the mode of the conversation we're having — the character inside my head, to whom I had been listening: the character of Cassandra Wakelin was unhappy with the way I'd handled her story. It was as if I had not provided the means by which she could tell it all. I had not resolved her situation. So I thought and thought and thought — and I tried this and that and the other — and, finally, I hit on the idea that Cassandra's story somehow needed to unfold *backwards*. Well . . . in the original version, Cass ends up in an insane asylum: driven there by her perception of the real world being a madhouse. . . . But — what if I were to *begin* the play in the asylum? What if I were to show the "madhouse" as the world? Then the perceptions of Cassandra Wakelin would be crystal clear to everyone. Her view of the world would fall into place for the rest of us, and her story could unfold in a way that made it easier for her to tell and for us to receive. She pretended the garden of the asylum was the garden in which she had grown — turned the inmates of the asylum into the "inmates" of her home — added to which, an asylum is the perfect place to act out a story whose parts are joined by emotional chronology, rather than timeology. . . .

w.w. There's no such word as "timeology. . . ."

T.F. There is now. Don't you see what I mean? In asylums — time flashes on and off — and, in between the flashes, there's nothing: greyness, stillness, silence. Waiting. But the things that are seen in the flashes are astonishing. Riveting: vivid and stark and absolutely unadorned with the grace of soft edges. All this, to say nothing of the fact that Cass's life needed to be set in a frame of fire. Every episode is a kind of burning. . . .

w.w. She sounds like Robert Ross in *The Wars*.

T.F. Well: they have a lot in common.

w.w. Outside of fire?

T.F. Yes. Photographs, for one thing. I think that maybe the photographs in Cass's album may have been the basis for the photographic technique of *The Wars*.

w.w. Cassandra Wakelin enters the asylum with nothing but a photo-album.

T.F. Yes. And *The Wars* unfolds as a series of pictures. Pictures and interviews. Anyway — I think the subject of this part of the conversation had to do with the effort involved with writing and finding Cass's place was the effort in her case.

w.w. And *The Wars*?

T.F. The effort there was to find the right pictures and find the right characters to interview. Also — as with everything — to pay attention to what it is the character really wants to tell you. What the character requires of you. And you don't know any of that until *after* the fact. Before the fact, you're lost. And — you know, that, too, is a good analogy for the work, for the effort involved. Being lost. What you have to do is go with your characters into the void — and help them find their way home. Does this make you think of lost animals? It does me. And the first thing you have to do with a lost animal is discover a mutual language. After the language — the problem can be revealed — after the revelation, the search can begin and after the search: maybe the solution. Maybe. Maybe. Only maybe. But that's what it is. You try to get the character all the way home.

w.w. What about your last book? You had so many people to get home. How many was it? Twenty? Thirty major characters?

T.F. Something like that. Yes. *Famous Last Words* . . . good heavens . . . writing *Famous Last Words* I went through five whole modes before I hit upon the character of Mauberley. Ezra Pound's Hugh Selwyn Mauberley. Five whole modes. I don't mean drafts. The draft work was endless: on each of them . . . but, in the end, I came upon Mauberley and realized I had found the perfect voice to narrate the story. And it was really through him — through Mauberley — that all the other characters found their way home. For which I was profoundly grateful. Believe me. I never fancied myself as a Tour Guide. And I think he maybe got me home, too. (LAUGHTER)

w.w. Yes. I've noticed you've been around a little more, recently.

T.F. Maybe that's where George and Brenda come from. And Alice. . . . You know: maybe they sort of tagged along on the return trip.

w.w. Well — I'm here to tell you, you'd better do something about that Alice. Dropping cigarettes on the floor . . . burning up the rugs. . . . Can't she learn to use an ashtray, like anyone else?

T.F. I'm sure it was an accident.

w.w. Didn't sound like an accident to me. Not the way you've got it written in there: ALICE DROPS HER CIGARETTE ON THE FLOOR. What does she do about it? Leave it there — watching it eat its way through to the floor boards?

T.F. Maybe it's a stone floor. . . .

w.w. Somehow, I doubt it. Given the fires in all your books. Oh, God — I hope that Alice leaves!

T.F. Maybe in a puff of smoke?

w.w. It would be a great relief.

T.F. I take it you and Alice don't get along. . . .

w.w. You're damned right we don't.

T.F. What about George and Brenda?

w.w. It remains to be seen. Are they loud? Do they argue all the time? And what are they arguing about?

T.F. Something George has found in a drawer upstairs. . . .

w.w. What?

T.F. I don't know. Something rather sinister, I should think.

w.w. Maybe one of Alice's cigarette butts.

T.F. Kept in an old lacquer box from Japan. . . .

(AT THIS MOMENT, THE TELEPHONE RINGS AND W.W. ANSWERS. A FRIEND HAS CALLED TO TELL US PRESIDENT SADAT HAS DIED AND PERHAPS WE SHOULD TURN ON THE RADIO. WE ELECT NOT TO LISTEN. WE DO, HOWEVER, PAUSE FOR A VERY LONG WHILE TO THINK ABOUT HIS DEATH AND THE SCENE OF HIS DEATH AND THE WORLD IN WHICH IT HAPPENED. LATER ON, W.W. STARTS THE QUESTIONS AGAIN. OUT ON THE LAWN, ONE WHOLE TREE HAS BEEN STRIPPED OF ITS LEAVES AND, AS IF ITS JOB HAD BEEN DONE FOR THE DAY, THE WIND HAS DROPPED. THE OTHER TREES ARE NOT YET BARE.)

w.w. One of the themes that is threaded through your work more than any other is a particular view of insanity — be it insanity by itself or drug or alcohol induced insanity. . . . You do have all these people who either see and deal with the world as if *it* were insane: or as if they were insane. Can you tell me why this is and where it comes from?

T.F. Yes. It comes from a perception of insanity which was introduced to me very early on in my life through someone close to me who had to be placed in a mental institution. And the effect that had — primarily, of course, on the person involved — but also on all the people who surrounded her — the effect of this was the first truly profound experience of my consciousness. By which I mean, I was old enough to watch and listen and see what was happening and to make

concise deductions and come to precise conclusions. I was seven. Maybe six. I know it was about that age because of the house we lived in and the rooms where some of the scenes I remember took place. And my perception of this person was that she was brilliant — that she had incredible insights into what was really going on in the world around us: but that she was . . . *odd*. This is to say that the conversations I had with her as a child were basically not “conversations” — but they were monologues: monologues of hers . . . not unlike this monologue of mine. And, in the course of delivering one of these monologues, she would reveal things about reality and portray things in a way that the so-called “sane” people around me — and around her — did not understand. Which is only to say — they did not or could not see the aspects of reality that she saw and could deliver to other people, if only they would listen. And it struck me — or, I should say, it *must* have struck me — because, of course, I didn’t have the . . . what? What is it you have as a child? You have the *intelligence* as a child to perceive things and take things in — but you haven’t the *intellect* — yet — to deal with whatever it is you’re receiving. Nonetheless, whatever you’re receiving is going down into the makings of the ultimate person you’re going to be: the person who *will* have the intellect to deal with these things. Anyway . . . it struck me that I should listen. To this person who was close to me, who was sitting in the room with me. And everything I heard — all of my experience with this person went down very deep into me. And I remember that one of the most vivid things was that she saw things very sharply. Her perception of the world was clarified through a route of her own that was special: that was unique . . . and maybe dangerous to other people. No. Not physically dangerous. But — you see — her clarity of vision was something that endangered the unclarified — perhaps the muddled — or the muddled perceptions of other people. She could see the heart of things. Of hurt, for instance. Of where the hurt truly lay: and of what had caused the hurt. And, sometimes, the hard core hurt of an accusation might issue from her mind, you see. And once it had reached her mind — how could she prevent it from reaching her lips? And this was dangerous. Because it . . . well, it tampered with the protective walls thrown up by other people to keep the hurt of reality out. So this was dangerous. Very dangerous. How do we live with reality? Once all the walls are in place. . . . And now, I turn to thinking of someone else: much later in my life. And with this other person — the accusations became unbearably harsh. Unbearably harsh. And the harshness — with this other person — could be violent: *the truth! The truth! The truth!* And, of course, *the truth! The truth! The truth!* became unendurable for other people to bear. So . . . do you see? When these people exist — when there are these people — then other people must look across the room and say: “that person over there is mad.” You see? “That person over there is crazy.” Because it is too disturbing to be told *the truth, the truth, the truth*. And this is not to lay blame at any particular doorstep: because — I mean, my

God — there's nothing more exhausting a person can think of than the truth. So — what can you do? You turn it off — like a radio.

w.w. Yes.

T.F. Or . . . you hide it in a drawer somewhere. In a lacquer box from Japan.

w.w. Called "asylum"?

T.F. Precisely.

w.w. Well: now we know about George and Brenda. Any clues about Alice yet?

T.F. Nope. But I'd like to say one more thing about the so-called "mad." I hope you understand I'm not in any way talking about the truth with a capital *T* when I talk about these people. I only mean the truth about matters as perceived in a given situation. One thing about the "mad," you see, is they don't like lies. So this is why I seize so often upon these people as the heroes of my work. It's only because they have this straight — flung out connection through the mind to some kind of absolute clarity. And this is what fiction is all about: achieving the clarity obscured by facts.

w.w. So what are facts?

T.F. Walls.

w.w. All right. Talk about the writer as "madman." And writing as therapy: something of value for the rest of us to eavesdrop on, from time to time.

T.F. Writing isn't therapy. Writing may be cathartic, but it certainly isn't therapy. On the other hand, if you're talking about the reader — and only about the reader — maybe the "therapeutic" value for those of us who read lies in the fact that we don't have to pass through whatever it is in a particular book, or play or whatever — we don't have to pass through whatever territory it explores, except vicariously. This has been said — and best said — by Adele Wiseman. Adele Wiseman said the writer goes down into the other world of hell for a few years and comes back up and tries to articulate the experience for everyone else.

w.w. It sort of saves you the busfare.

T.F. Sort of. But the main thing to remember is that the writer has a round-trip ticket. The writer comes back. Do you see? And this information — the information that everyone doesn't have to perish down there is marvellous. Marvellous. And so maybe this is the therapeutic value: the therapeutic spin-off for the reader. *Hell can be survived*. And since everyone, at some point, goes through hell — this news is extremely valuable. But everyone can't articulate this news. Everyone can't tell what it is they've survived — and how it is they're still alive. But a good writer can. Have you read *Old Woman At Play*?

w.w. Yes, of course. The book about Adele Wiseman's mother. . . .

T.F. Then you know what I mean. Here was a woman living in hell who was telling us it didn't have to *be* hell at all. So Adele Wiseman went down in there, where her mother was living, and she asked the right questions and she got terrific answers and she came back up and she passed the answers on to us. And the answer was: *to make of hell a better place*. Dear God! This book should be handed out with every birth certificate.

w.w. Talk about genius, now. Is genius a kind of "madness"?

T.F. No. I don't think so. No. Though I see why you're asking. People think it has to be a kind of madness the same way they think the people I talked about before are "mad." Put it this way. A genius is someone you cannot avoid seeing. I mean — how could you walk into a room and not see Margot Fonteyn? If Margot Fonteyn is there — there's no way she can hide. Is there (LAUGHTER). . . . Even if you've never seen her before. Even if she's wearing the most ordinary, everyday dress — even if she's standing behind a man who's six feet tall: you're going to see her. And what you see is really the thing that drove her to be a genius of dance . . . the unavoidable: the ultimate. The clarity of gesture. Bam! And Mozart must have been the same. Can you hear him and avoid him? Never. . . .

w.w. But you may not like him.

T.F. No. But that's not the point here, is it. The point is — you cannot remain unaware that something extraordinary is happening through that person. Something that no one can explain. And yet — if you're reading Shakespeare — listening to Mozart or watching Margot Fonteyn — there doesn't have to be an "explanation." The thing is — you come away different. Changed. Put it this way: the audience that sits down to *Lear* is not the audience that rises at the end. And that is Shakespeare's genius. If this is "madness" — more! More!

w.w. All right. Here we are back, more or less where we began. In the theatre. And you've just been talking about Margot Fonteyn and you, yourself, began as a dancer. So — what you wanted to express as a dancer — as an actor — as a painter — you now express as a writer. *Words*. Words on paper . . . which is a little different from these other forms of expression you began with. . . .

T.F. Yes. Yes. Words. Well, now. . . . Take dance. What the dancer does is make a series of statements. And the statements are made up of gestures: gestures in a sequence. So words — words are the vocabulary of literate gesture. And the combinations of your words have to be as precise as the combinations of gestures used by a dancer to make an articulate statement in dance. And there's something else, I think, to be said about this. You know, when you learn to dance — when you learn to move — you learn to move — you learn to make each gesture from

the centre of your body: from the *solar plexus* — from the diaphragm. You learn that *everything* must originate there and grow outward towards the conclusion of the gesture: the formation of the statement. And, as an actor, when you learn how to “speak” — you learn to speak from there: from the centre — from the diaphragm. And, oddly enough — and here we come to writing — when a sentence *hits* — or when a paragraph *hits* — that’s *where* it hits. In the *solar plexus*.

w.w. But —

t.f. Now, wait a minute. Be patient. I’m making a point. You know how you and I, in the theatre, will so often say: “Isn’t it strange. Isn’t it really too bad. . . . Everything about that person is right — except: they don’t know how to use their hands.” Or — they carry their heads too high. Or the shoulders are stiff. Okay? *Now*: think of that marvellous, wonderful moment when Lynn Seymour dances onto the stage. Yes? Glorious. Because the whole of her presence is unfolding from the centre. Toller Cranston is the same. Every single gesture is totally fulfilled. Their fingertips — you know? — they flick the last cadence from the ends of their fingers. And *you cannot breathe until it is over*. They hold you enthralled to the very last nuance. Yes?

w.w. Yes.

t.f. Well: words are the same. Words in a sentence are a written gesture. And if the cadence is wrong — if the rhythm is wrong — if a single syllable is out of place — the sentence fails. And if the sentence fails: the paragraph fails. And if the paragraph fails . . . the book fails. Why? Because you have failed to impel the reader forward with every gesture . . . right to the “fingertips” — all the way from the *solar plexus*. That’s where books are written. That’s where readers read.

w.w. You know what?

t.f. No. What?

w.w. I think our friend Alice just dropped another cigarette. . . .

t.f. Aren’t you going to pick it up?

w.w. No. (A PAUSE) I want to see what happens.

