

Fiction

Our story

Chris Fleming

is a writer and academic. His most recent book is *On Drugs*.

I have a friend who I see a few times a year; we usually just catch up over a pizza. We used to play in a band but now mostly just text each other memes. He's a good storyteller. I've heard most of the stories he tells me, but I enjoy the retelling. I guess I do the same thing, too – tell the same stories just because I think they're good stories. People don't usually say "I've heard this one" when I do, and not because they're being polite; my friends are not polite. I think I'm a good storyteller as well, and people like hearing them. Maybe that's one of the reasons we're friends.

Besides, what we call "society" used to do this a lot – tell the same stories over and over. Nobody in church ever calls out, "Hey! I've heard this one already, buddy!" Although I sometimes felt like saying that in church, because I didn't like many of those stories. I can't relate to 900-year-old shepherds who have kids when they're 800. I don't think it's strange that that doesn't speak to me.

But there's one story he tells me that I actually told him – and he tells it to me as if it's his story, as though the incident happened to him. It's awkward. It's a good story. And each time he tells me it I feel like saying "Brian,

that didn't happen to you – that happened to me." But the closest I've come is to say, "Huh. Really? Funny. Same thing happened to me." And he looks at me sceptically, because it's a really specific story – it's not like something that happens all the time.

It's about my first girlfriend, who came to my parents' house one night and just before dinner excused herself to go to the bathroom. And she literally found a bathroom – a room with a sink and a bath and that's it; the toilet was down the hall. Anyway, instead of leaving and trying to find the toilet, she just jumped up on the sink, on the basin, and started to wee. Except it wasn't strong enough to carry her weight and so the whole thing tore off the wall and crashed to the ground and we rushed in and there she was, pants around her ankles and the bathroom half destroyed, shattered porcelain and distended pipes. She was okay physically but emotionally wrecked – as you'd expect. I can't imagine her embarrassment, really; or perhaps it's more correct to say I can only imagine her embarrassment. I thought it was really brave of her to even stay, but she did. And we had a pretty nice night, given the situation.

The next time she came over, a few months later, she seemed freshly nervous, really sheepish. She said hello to my mum and dad but when she sat down, she didn't check where she was sitting and she sat directly on top of our dog, a much-loved 14-year-old chihuahua, and broke its pelvis and two ribs. We rushed it to the vet and my girlfriend sat in the back of the car and just wailed and wailed. She was so loud one of my ears was distorting. Nobody could talk. I thought she was monopolising the grief. We had to eventually put the dog down.

There was really no coming back from that incident. It didn't matter how much we loved each other – it was over. We didn't break up that night, but it fizzled out after a month or so. It was hard to look at each other.

Anyway, my friend tells me this story every few years – the whole fucking thing – embellishing it with a few details about his own parents' house. I don't want to embarrass him, because obviously he has forgotten that it was me who told him this story, although I don't know how. I guess he thinks he heard it somewhere else. The scarier possibility is that he actually now thinks it did happen to him and so if I tried to correct him, he'd think I'd gone mad. He'd worry about me or resent me, or both. Once I began to tell him a story about "someone who sometimes tells me a story that actually happened to me and he doesn't even know it" and he replied, "You've told me this before." He didn't want to hear that story, which was good. I wasn't sure how it went, anyway.

And truth be told I don't mind him telling me my story. But I'm bothered that he tells other people, because that means I can't ever tell that story again, in case they think, "Hmm... that's not your story – that's Brian's." And I may not even know they think this, because they might be too polite to say. I know I said they weren't polite – but maybe they are, at least about this. He's a friend but the fact is he's stolen my story and may not even know it. Can you accidentally steal something? And what hurts even more, albeit for different reasons, is that he tells it well – maybe even better than I do. What I'm most worried about is that one day I won't even notice that it's my story at all – that he will have completely taken it, that I now think it's his, too. By then it won't

just be a matter of a stolen story: it'll be a part of me that has been taken. But at least then I might be able to enjoy it again.

Things got awkward last Saturday when he came over and watched the football and drank a lot of beer, which we usually don't do. I left the room to go to the toilet and when I came back he was standing, reading this story, the one you're reading now. He held the sheets of paper in front of him, looking really serious.

"Dude," he said. "This is outrageous!" I didn't know what to say. "You've never told me this. I'm pretty angry."

"Well..." I said.

"You need to tell him," he said.

"Tell him?"

"Tell this guy what's going on."

"Oh," I said.

"Tell him what he's done."

"Oh! No. It's just a story," I said.

"What?"

"It's fiction," I said.

"Oh man. I'm an idiot!"

"Not really. You didn't know what kind of thing you were reading," I said. "It's actually a compliment."

"Well, I was convinced! You're a great storyteller, man. That's wild. I mean, some parts of it, now that I think about it, are pretty far-fetched."

"Oh, okay."

"That's not a criticism," he said.

"Of course not."

"But I like. I think it's good."

"Thanks," I said.

"Actually," he said, "can I take this with me?" ●