

## ■ Author's Afterwords . . .

*Esquire* called and asked me to do a story on Macaulay Culkin. I said I didn't want to profile him, but if the point was to profile someone his age, I'd be game. The first challenge was to find a 10-year-old who was an individual and someone symbolic of his species. I asked friends of friends and finally was introduced to Colin. I didn't want a kid whose life was exceptional. I figured a boy who lived in the suburbs was more typical than a Manhattan kid, and Colin's parents were schoolteachers, which seemed perfect.

I'm a proud banner bearer of the idea of being completely unprepared. I say this knowing that all journalism professors will shudder. When you're writing about a politician or a celebrity who has an agenda, it's important to be prepared because you're in an adversarial role. But when you go in to write a story that requires empathy and curiosity, the less preconception you bring the more genuine your empathetic connection will be. For me, the best way to do this is to put myself in a sort of emotional danger, to go in vulnerable. The fact is, I *am* vulnerable—I am the stranger, the one who's awkward and out of place. It's important for me to keep that emotion, to remember that I'm the one who doesn't know what's going on. It makes me ask better questions, because I need to understand through their eyes, not through what I've boned up on.

I spent two weeks, day and night with Colin. I'd go to his house in the morning without a plan, go to school with him, hang out with him after school. I can't tell you how self-conscious I felt the day I began. Colin didn't talk to me for the first three days. I thought, I can't do this story—I can't even get him to talk to me! I didn't ask him a lot of questions because I thought if I started pestering him, he would avoid me more and more. I could tell he was embarrassed going to school with this big girl tagging along. On the third day, he apparently decided I was okay, and that day after school he said, "Do you want to come over and see my room?"

At some point on every story I find myself thinking that I don't know what I'm doing. I don't know where the story is going, and my reporting feels like just a bunch of scattered moments. Being worried that I've lost track keeps me sharp. I wait until I'm finished reporting to figure out the story. Sometimes, as I'm reviewing my notes or writing, a tiny detail suddenly takes on weight. I'm often thoroughly surprised. A story really

is a creature, and the creature always has arms and legs I didn't expect it to have. That's why I'm a fanatical over-reporter. I don't know what's going to be useful, so everything is important.

I use note pads and not a tape recorder. I don't like dealing with technology while I'm trying to pay attention, and I hate transcribing. When I'm through reporting, I type up my notes as a way of reviewing them. Then I sit down and highlight important material. The Colin story was written as if from inside his mind. When I re-read it, I laughed because it's as much in his voice as mine. The way the world appeared to him was so divine and eccentric. It was a teeny bit realistic and a lot imaginary. His voice was the perfect way to capture his complicated sense of the world. The way I saw things as an adult didn't seem important.

When I finally do sit down to write, I'm ready. It sounds a bit mystical, but I don't exactly know where the writing comes from. I often look at a lead after I've written it and think, Where did that come from? And it seems like the only lead I could have possibly written. Often when I'm writing, the story starts having a voice that seems very natural. It's not deliberate. I get a little hypnotized by the sound of the people I'm talking to, and it fills my head. I fall into a rhythm with it. Before I get to that, I usually suffer through a few days of torture when instead of writing I wash lots of dishes and make the bed over and over and get my shoes polished, just to distract myself while I'm letting all this reporting cook. When I feel ready to write, it's because something has risen to the surface. I feel it and hear it when I sit down and start writing.

I took about 10 days to write Colin. It simmered for about three days before I started. On every story, I worry that this is the one I can't write. I used to interpret my anxiety as a premonition—this really is the one I'm going to screw up. But if you get nervous every time you fly, you realize after a while that you're not having a premonition that the plane will crash: You just get nervous every time you fly.

Sometimes, when a sentence I've written is musical, I'm just so happy. When I think of an analogy that seems really fresh and different, I'm just delighted. To create something that's separate from me—a thing that exists out in the world—gives me intense pleasure. I'm as excited as if I had pulled a rabbit out of a hat. I'm an unspiritual person, so I'm embarrassed to say it's a spiritual sensation. But it's a passion to express, and that is spiritual. The only way to create is to acknowledge that and savor it.—S. O.