

**Whoever**  
by Carol Emshwiller

Carol Emshwiller's fiction first graced our pages some fifty-two years ago. Over the years, she has contributed memorable stories such as "Pelt," "Acceptance Speech," and "Creature." Her latest story is an engaging and charming take on the themes of identity and memory.

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I forgot who I was. I suppose it's just as well. This doorway, where I lie, is dirty. *If* this doorway is my doorway and *if* I'm dressed as I usually dress, then I can't have been a very respectable person. First thing I'll do, I'll go get something else to wear and then I'll find a good place to live. Something more like the new me. If this is a new me.

I wonder what I look like. My hands seem strong. My fingernails are clean. I'm not too fat. Am I the same sex I used to be?

Did I actually wipe out my own mind in order to start from scratch? Did I do it deliberately or was it by mistake? But what a good idea! I'm glad I thought of it. I probably got sick and tired of the way things were back in my former life.

But first I have to find a mirror to see who I am now. Or a shop window.

I get up and brush myself off. I feel a little wobbly but I don't want to stay here. Thank goodness nobody saw me lying in this dirty doorway. At least I hope nobody did.

I walk along beside the shops. I glance at myself but just every now and then. I don't let myself stand and stare at me. I don't want to be too open about it. People would think things.

What I see is a woman, not young. That figures. I'm exactly the age when it's logical to want to change your life. There's still a bit of a future in front of me.

But what about this town? It looks a little strange, though maybe it's just my nice new view of everything.

And what is the language here? I heard somebody passing by and I

couldn't understand a word she said. Of course that doesn't mean anything. She could be a foreigner. I wonder what language I'm thinking in. Wouldn't it be nice if it was French? I wonder how many languages I know. How do you find out a thing like that?

I wonder what other things I might be good at. I might even be able to play the piano. I wonder if I can find a piano and check on myself. Can I paint and draw? Can I ride a horse?

Should I try some skill right now? But there's no handy piano. I'd like, if not the piano, then the violin. I hope I don't know how to play the banjo. I want a higher class life.

I cross the street to a newspaper stand and look at the headlines. I don't recognize the writing. Have I forgotten how to read?

Well, I wanted a whole new start—at least I *think* I did, and what better way than to appear right here knowing absolutely nothing? Just think, I can be anybody I want.

I should start planning right now. I wish I had a notebook. I'd start writing down possible ways to be. I can even pick what age I think I am. I'll say forty. Or better yet, thirty-nine.

But this is bothersome. I'm hungry. How am I going to get something to eat? I looked in all my pockets. I don't have any money of any sort. Not even in my bra.

Is it just like my old self to run out without any money? Or was I in a hurry to escape from a husband and didn't have time to get my money? Maybe I need to change my looks in case of being recognized.

I don't have a single bit of identification. Though, if this is to be a whole new life, why would I care? Except it's disconcerting. Too much freedom. Maybe I should have started more gradually—changed myself little by little, one step at a time. I jumped into things without thinking. That shows what I used to be like. I just left myself here in my oldest clothes.

But I shouldn't be too judgmental of my old self. Perhaps I had my reasons. What if I had too many children and was trying to get away? Maybe only for an afternoon? I must have thought: How nice to be all alone. I should enjoy it. And I do. But I shouldn't have gone quite this far. That old me must have been impetuous—probably always in a hurry.

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I start walking—a nice fast clip. Thank goodness my former self is in pretty good shape. I can't wait until I come upon a piano or a violin.

This seems to be a big town. Perhaps I thought I could get lost here. I'd better watch out. Somebody may come along and take me back to a family full of children.

I walk faster. I take a sharp turn. I double back on myself just in case I'm being followed. (If I find myself wobbling, I want it to be in a nice clean fancy doorway.) I avoid everybody that walks near me and looks suspicious and lots do. It makes my progress slow what with all this doubling back. Of course I don't know where I'm heading, anyway. Just out of here.

When a large chubby man looks at me as if he might know me, I duck into a dusty little bookstore. Thank goodness the man walks on.

But a bookstore is just what I want. I need a notebook.

There's only one man in there sitting at a cluttered desk near the front. He's skinny and ugly—graying and balding. I'm quite taken with him.

He says, "Good morning," without looking up. And in my language.

"Do you have, perhaps, a shopworn notebook you were going to throw out and the nubbin of a pencil you could spare? I'd like to pay but I've mislaid my money."

He looks up, suspicious. Studies me. I must look honest, or maybe just pitiful, because he says, "Of course." He finds a nice new notebook and a really good pencil.

"Oh, these are much too good. Please, just something worn out."

"That's all right. I can spare them."

What a nice man. I decide to tell ... well, not all, but some. "I'm starting over. I need to make a list of all the new things I want in my life."

"I guess we all do that at certain times in our lives."

It occurs to me that I'll need a name. I'd better think of one I like. Isabel? Charlotte? Lillian? I suspect that those are names I always wished I

had even before I forgot who I was.

“My name is Geraldine. I play the piano.”

Oh, well, he’ll never find out. Maybe I’ll not ever find out either. Perhaps rather than looking for a piano, I should avoid them.

I wonder if I can get him to ask me out to lunch.

“Is there someplace where I can sit and write in my new notebook? A diner or café where they’d let me sit without buying anything? As I said...” (I’m making a point of it) “...I haven’t a cent.”

And it happens just as I want it to.

“If you can wait until my helper comes, she takes over for an hour at noon, I’ll take you out to lunch. Don’t worry, I’ll keep quiet so you can write.”

Perhaps he’s as taken with me as I am with him.

I say, “I don’t usually dress this way, you know. I had to leave in a hurry.”

Of course he’s not dressed all that well himself. His jacket is quite threadbare.

“I used to have a nice silk scarf, all tans and browns and yellows.” (I wonder if I really did.) “I wish I’d brought it. I feel funny in these clothes.”

“It’s not a fancy place, but they let you sit as long as you want if you buy something first.”

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We sit by the window. He watches the people going by outside while I open the notebook as if I’m getting ready to make notes. But what to write? That I’m feeling so good about this new life? That already good things are happening? But, in case he looks, I don’t want him to see anything like that. Instead I write: Piano, practice!!!!

If I were writing this for me I should be writing something like: make money. Maybe: Find my talents and skills. Maybe: Must find place to sleep tonight.

But, anyway, right now I'd rather talk. I say, "I used to always be on the go. I never stopped to think before I did something."

I write: THINK three times with several exclamation points.

"Do you think writing it down will help?"

He shrugs.

I say, "I've swept away my past." I say, "Have we met before?" I say, "I do love books."

My new self talks and talks.

I think to write: STOP TALKING, but instead I stop. I write: THINK!!! a few more times.

I hope he doesn't ask me where I'm from. Where should I say? Perhaps I'm from some other time. Like from the future. Perhaps I can bring these people new technology they've not conceived of. I hope I'm not from the past. How does one find out a thing like that? Finding out if I play the piano will be a lot easier.

I say, "I'm going to call my notebook: The Diary of Lost Time."

I say, "But what about you? Do you, as do I, play the piano?"

"Oh, no. Not at all. I've strummed a guitar a bit a long time ago. Most people have."

He hunches over his tea as if he's a too tall man trying to look smaller though he's hardly taller than I am.

"Are you a poet? You look like a poet."

"I used to ... now and then, but not much anymore."

I feel a sudden yearning. For what? Nostalgia for my unknown past? For my past that was in the future? I yearn to tell him, "I'm from the future. Or maybe from the past," but I know better than to say any such thing. Tears come to my eyes. I wish I was back where I belong wherever or whenever that is. I take a big drink of tea. I wipe my eyes while pretending to wipe my mouth.

He's saying, "...so that's all about me. Not much."

"Oh that's very interesting."

"Here's the scar," he says, and pulls up his pants leg.

"Oh, my."

But he has to get back to the bookstore. He tells me if I want a quiet place to write I can come with him and sit in the back room.

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I sit in the little cluttered room and try to forget about money and where I might have to sleep tonight. I write Geraldine on the front of my notebook so I can check on it if I forget what I told him. I'm sure he told me his name but I don't remember.

On the first page I write: What DO I know about my skills? I sit still and think. What do I know about the future? Are there any tests for finding out when one comes from? I think as hard as I can but I don't come up with any answers. I've hardly made a single note.

When I hear customers in the front part of the store, I snoop around. I find several coins in a drawer. I find half a peanut brittle bar. I take them.

Did I used to steal things? Maybe this is my usual way. I hope it isn't. No wonder I decided to start over.

I simply will not ask for any more help from this man. He's just too nice.

I gather up my things—into a plastic bag with the name of the bookstore on it—and walk to the front. I guess I look like I'm leaving because he stops me.

"It's cooling off. Don't you have a sweater?"

I don't know what to answer.

"You don't, do you?"

"I'll be all right."

“It looks like rain, too. I can’t invite you home with me. My place is too small, but if you want, you can stay here. It won’t be very comfortable but there’s a cot in the store room. I hate to see anybody homeless.”

Of course anybody from the future has got to be homeless. Did he guess where I’m from?

“What can I do for you? Any knowledge? Any skills I may have that might be useful?”

“One of these days you can play the piano for me.”

“I’ll do that. I promise.”

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He locks me in ... so to speak. I can get out if I need to but I can’t lock up after myself if I leave so I shouldn’t.

I sit down again with my notebook and think about the future. I can’t tell if I really am from there or not. Maybe I could if I could see the new buildings of this time to see just how new they are, but this is an old part of town. There always are old parts that are just the same as hundreds of years ago. They do still have cars. Though in this neighborhood they seem rather grungy. I can think of a car that’s shaped like a bubble. I can think of walkways over roads so nobody ever has to cross the street. (But are we still walking across streets in the future?)

I appeared without a newspaper with a date, though why would we still have newspapers in the future? I seem to remember they were dying. I suppose bookstores are, too. (That’s why this funny little dusty one.) I arrived with nothing except my clothes. It’s a wonder I didn’t come through naked. And of course I would be homeless. Anybody coming from the future would be. I need to accept help. I shouldn’t feel so bad about having to accept kindness from this man. Without people like him none of us time travelers would be able to get along at all.

Do we still have pianos in the future?

Oh my God, do I need to remember that dirty doorway where I first arrived in order to get back to my real present time? Is that what they call the portal? I don’t think I can find it.

I lie down but I can’t sleep. I’m thinking how, even if I really am from

the future, there's nothing I can teach anybody. I don't even know how to make old things. I couldn't make a printing press, or especially not a flute what with all those valves. I couldn't even hang a door, frame a window.... Light bulbs! Actually I don't even know how to make a candle.

I'm having a terrible night. But I'm going to leave before he comes back. He said he'd be here at 8:30 but I'll be gone. He's done enough. Other people should help the woman from the future.

(Before I try to get back to the portal, should I try to find a piano? Middle C. Why do I know that?)

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Except I'm not gone. I finally fall asleep and don't wake up until after eleven. He's brought me coffee and a muffin and opened the shop long ago. The coffee's cold, but still good.

I wish I could remember his name. It must be in here somewhere. While he's busy I snoop around again.

Then I hear the front door slam ... hard. I go out and see a man come in who looks like he doesn't belong here. The bookstore man and I both know it. We look at each other. The man is burly and frowning. He's like those men I tried to avoid yesterday. He wanders around, pretending to look at titles. Is he going to buy something or just walk around? Or is this a stickup? If I'm really from the future I ought to be able to do something these people wouldn't think of. Or maybe he came for me. Maybe he's one of those men I was trying to avoid all day yesterday.

But I shouldn't jump to conclusions. That would be just like my old impetuous self.

He comes close to me and whispers, "What in the world are you thinking?"

I have no idea what he means.

I tell him this must be a case of mistaken identity.

He grabs my arm. So hard it hurts. "Come on," he says.

Does he want to take me back to my present? I mean back to my present in the future.

“Do I mean something to you?”

“I’d never have thought to see you in a bookstore.”

“Don’t we have books where we come from?”

The odd thing is, the bookstore man is bald and ugly and this man is handsome, even to a full head of curly black hair, but I don’t like his looks at all.

The bookstore man says, “Can I help you?” Politely, as if the man might want to buy a book. But the man doesn’t let go of me and doesn’t stop trying to pull me out the door.

Do people from the future know how to fight? Do I? I wonder if I ever knew karate or any such thing. For all I know about myself, I could be an expert.

On the other hand, maybe this handsome revolting man can help me get back to the future. I don’t know which side I ought to be on. Of course here I don’t have a place to be or a life at all, though I do have a start.

But I wouldn’t want anything to happen to the bookstore man.

The bookstore man tries to help me pull away, but the big man swings me around as if I was a weapon and knocks the bookstore man down. A lot of books go down, too—a whole shelf full, and I’m down, but I’m free. The floor is slippery with books. The bookstore man gets up and tries to punch the big man.

I’m thinking: Stop wondering if you know karate. Respond automatically just as if you did.

I wait for my chance and then give a good kick right where it hurts the most and when the big man is dealing with that, I push him over backward.

I’m thinking: Any minute he’s going to disappear into the future but he doesn’t. He staggers up and looks at me, surprised. As he leaves he says, “Well, stay here, then.”

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After our adventure the bookstore man and I hug and the bookstore

man gives me a *very* nice little peck on the cheek. Then we prop up the bookcase and put the books back.

To celebrate we go out to a piano bar. It's early. Hardly anybody is there. Now's my chance. I mean I was pretty good at karate or whatever that was. I tell myself to do just as I did when I kicked and pushed the big man. I didn't think at all and everything came out just right.

I sit down at the piano. There's Chopin. There's Bach. There's Mozart. Do I know them or are they just names I've heard before? I put my hands on the keys. I spread my fingers. There's my middle C right in front.