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doctor and couldn’t be bothered with the little things ... like going to class. The one who dropped out, three credits short of a psychology degree. Next thing you know, he’s “amped up on meth,” standing in a circle of Puerto Rican gang members in the South Bronx. One gang member named Judd grasps his sawed-off shotgun. Gene is standing, literally, in the middle of the lead of his first magazine piece, a 1972 cover story in *New York Magazine*.

Three days later, police would hunt for Judd; he was wanted for killing a rival gang member. “Well, to be honest, it didn’t seem that hot a moment. There was tension, but I don’t think I felt bullets were gonna fly,” says Gene. “Hey, listen, I SHOT HEROIN back then, so I wasn’t really very safety-conscious in general.”

The only thing that could get him higher than drugs was finding, and telling, great stories. “I don’t think I was ever an addict.” He re-thinks the answer. “More like heavy-duty heroin user.” What saved him was the college paper. “I loved that too, and you couldn’t really be smashed all the time and write copy.”

So that’s exactly what he does: Write lots of copy. And he’s good at it. In the four decades since Gene got high and joined up with a street gang, he’s become one of America’s preeminent feature writers. His 2010 anthology, *Fiddler in the Subway*, chronicles some of his best-known work: knocking on igloos in Alaska, mourning his father’s death, worshipping Garry Trudeau, and getting inside the (adolescent) mind of The

Great Zucchini, the children’s entertainer. In 2007, Gene wondered what would happen if he put Joshua Bell in a D.C. Metro station. Would anyone notice? The Pulitzer committee did. Gene won his first of two feature writing Pulitzers for “Pearls for Breakfast” and followed up two years later with one for “Fatal Distraction,” his heart-wrenching account of parents who forget their children in cars, only to find them dead hours later.

But this still doesn’t make Gene, well, Gene. Beneath his puffed-up curly black hair and that almost-done psych degree, there’s a funny guy. Dave Barry, the Pulitzer Prize-winning humorist, thinks of the storyteller like this: “There are two Genes ... the asshole humor columnist and this really deep guy who writes features. I’m not sure they ever talk to one another.”

But they do talk to each other – on the page. And that’s what sets this guy apart. Now I just have to figure out how he does it. Gene’s willing to help, up to a point. “The only thing I can’t do, because my wife would kill me, is take you into my house.”

Two days later, that’s where I am. Knocking on his front door, Gene’s wife be damned, still waiting for an answer.

THE WEINGARTENS live in an 1876 row house on Capitol Hill, just across the street from the Eastern Market coffee shop where we met two days ago. Gene moved here from Bethesda with his wife in 2001, just in time to see the Pen-

tagon burn three miles to the west. Inside, there are clocks. Lots of them. A symphony of cuckoos that he likes to tinker with. They’re everywhere, a manifestation of Gene’s mechanical brain. (Gene once told a reader in an online chat that “Nothing, including heroin, compares with the buzz of fixing an old clock.”) Everything he does is mechanical, from his approach to writing features or humor right down to his hobby of fixing all these clocks.

And then there’s khaki-clad Gene, leaning against the wall of his dining room holding – wait for it – a walrus penis bone he brought home from Alaska. This is not an insignificant artifact: Gene holds the 3-foot bone and smiles for a picture. He concedes that there’s a guy down in Florida named Dave Barry who also has a walrus penis bone. Yes, that Dave. The one who went from traveling around the country teaching business people how to write proper English to writing for Gene at *Tropic*, the *Miami Herald*’s Sunday magazine.

“Somebody showed me a piece Dave had written for the Philly *Enquirer* magazine about natural childbirth. It was the first time I could remember ... maybe in my life ... laughing out loud at the written word. You know, you smile at the written word. You chuckle. You laugh inside.”

Next thing you know, Dave’s writing for Gene once a month. Then twice. Then every week. Then Dave won a Pulitzer for humor writing ... and the two have been competing like rambunctious schoolboys ever since. Think of their relationship like this: When Gene called Dave to brag about his penis bone, Dave listened to the whole story, then pointed out that he, too had a walrus penis bone. And it was a half inch longer. “My column appears where Dave’s used to appear, so periodically when somebody wants to tell me I suck, they do it by saying ‘You’re not as funny as Dave Barry was.’”

Gene leads me down a steep set of wooden stairs to an 8-by-10 jail cell – complete with cast iron bars and brick walls. It’s a personal space, not a “show” office by any measure. And it isn’t so much decorated as it is littered with ... things. His two Pulitzer prizes hang in \$10 document frames over the desk where his best stories took shape. It’s covered in crumpled paper, loose change, two cordless phones and a roll of Scotch tape.

Despite the mess, a few prized possessions stand out. No, not Gene’s two Pulitzers. Gene’s most treasured piece is a hand-drawn Doonesbury cartoon that Garry Trudeau produced to

accompany “Doonesbury’s War,” the profile Gene wrote of his comic strip hero. Gene’s identity as a writer doesn’t exist within the context of winning a Pulitzer.

Everything you need to know about what makes this guy’s inner clock tick lies within the frames of the funny pages and an insatiable envy he has for Garry Trudeau – not as a comic strip artist – but as a storyteller.

Gene insists the heart of any good piece of journalism is when it reveals the deepest meaning of life, and he gets 10,000 words to do just that. Garry Trudeau gets a comic strip – and he pulls it off every time. Both are feats we all hope to achieve one day. Here’s how it’s done: Garry and Gene aren’t just sponges – that’s too passive. They’re vacuum cleaners of the world around them. Dysons of cyclone-powered information suction. They’re always reporting, whether they know it (or not).

One night in Tucson, Gene’s sitting at a bar with Garry and a filmmaker who’s just released a war documentary. They’re talking about how constant emails and Skype sessions aren’t all good news for soldiers. They’re bringing the stresses of home to the battlefield. A few weeks later, Gene opens the newspaper to “Doonesbury” and sees that night in the bar play out in the day’s strip.

This is the kind of “truth” any feature writer would love to reveal over the course of a story, but Gene sees the narrative arc play itself out over four cartoon panels:

Panel one: Ray looks at a chat window on his laptop inside of a combat tent. “Yo, *step-pops, Desmond here.*”

Panel two: Desmond keeps typing. “*Not checkin’ in is not cool, man. Mom spent the evenin’ thinkin’ she’d never see you again ...*”

Panel three: “*And I was freaking’ too, man. There’s all this stuff we never dealt with, questions I never asked you ...*”

Panel four: “*Like, if you get smoked who gets your ride?*”

Ray finally speaks. “*I hate this kid.*”

When Gene saw this strip, he emailed Garry to see if it was based on that night in Tucson. Garry writes back, saying he didn’t even remember that night until he read Gene’s email.

AS THE CLOCK-TINKERER’S COLLECTION chimes half past one, Gene knows he’s got appointment to keep. With the sewer man. Gene does not have a clue how to get to the D.C. Sew-

age Treatment Plant, but he knows the precise path he took to becoming a writer.

Rewind to 1978. In the introduction to *Fiddler in the Subway*, Gene tells the story of the night he learned to write. He was a drunk young reporter struggling to expose the stench of the Detroit Wastewater Treatment Plant’s dumping of untreated sewage into Lake Erie.

Gene tells it best: “I wrote something like this: ‘The Detroit Wastewater Treatment facility, long the bane of environmental regulators, continues to be grievously plagued by a thicket of problems involving underfunding and mismanagement, and remains in flagrant violation of federal clean-water standards.’”

His editor read it and responded with the two words that sent Gene for a bottle of something strong: “It’s fine.”

Gene says he never remembers waking up in the middle of that night, but he must’ve. Somehow, he shook the tequila and self-pity long enough to find his voice. Here’s what was waiting for his editor the next morning: “Every day, liquid sewage – three million gallons of it from starting points across metro Detroit – roars through the subterranean channels into a collecting point five miles down the road from the Renaissance Center, on West Jefferson. Then it hits the fan.”

Thirty-three years later, Gene can’t pass up an opportunity to return to his roots as a literal muckraker; when the D.C. Sewage Treatment Plant’s P.R. guy writes to offer a tour, Gene holds his nose and says yes.

With one hand on the wheel of his Honda Civic and the other reaching for scribbled-down directions to the poop processing plant, Gene eases away from his house. “So, I’ve been thinking about how I’d teach a class.”

Picture it: Gene would walk into class at NYU, dressed much like he is today – a navy diamond cardigan over a light blue button-down, pleated chinos and a pair of broken-in New Balance sneakers. With a reporter’s notebook in one hand and copies of a class reading list in the other, he’d gather the class around a large table and announce that they would have only one requirement: writing a single magazine story. Then he’d explain why it’d be the toughest (and the best) stories they’d ever written.

“What you’re looking for in a story is to make it warrant the space you want to spend on it. It’s a minor narrative and a larger perspective. Tell me something about the human condition. How can you use this story to tell me something? The value of finding a mystery to be solved. Where

you can start out on a quest for something and solve it. Interesting characters. All the stuff that we all know but that 21-year-olds might not.”

“Stuff” like the true meaning of objectivity and truth. Don’t cue the Fox News “fair and balanced” theme song just yet. Gene’s view can’t be expressed in a slogan. Sure, objectivity is important during the reporting of the story. What’s more important than being open to other people’s views and being able to change yours when the facts warrant? “But the requirement for objectivity ends with the reporting.”

Yes, Gene just said that.

“When you are writing, you are writing subjectively. You have figured out what the truth of a situation is, and it’s your job to tell the truth. It’s not your job to tell all sides of the issue. To me that’s a namby-pamby way of doing things. I call it the ‘On the other hand, Mr. Hitler believes ...’ theory of journalism.”

It’s not an easy feat to pull off. Facts are facts and quotes are quotes, right? Not to Gene. The same guy who says objectivity ends with the reporting has an equally cavalier way of pulling it off: “I’ll look at my notes, then I’ll put them away. And I won’t look at them again until I’ve finished a draft of the story.” The facts might not always be right and the quotes might be a little off (hey, it’s a first draft), but Gene hasn’t found a better way to get to the best-possible version of a story.

Gene would teach lessons like this each week by dissecting, paragraph by paragraph, the best journalism he knows – some of it his own. After all, that’s how he learned to write. Only Gene was under a bit more pressure to learn. “There was literally a period of time in my life when I became an editor of long-form stories and didn’t really know what I was doing. I wasn’t really ready for the assignment. So I began reading very carefully and figuring out what worked and what didn’t.”

Gene doesn’t hesitate naming the first piece he’d teach. “There’s something called ‘The Poet and the Birthday Girl.’ The perfect story by Madeleine Blais.” It was the story of a furniture saleswoman/poet named Hannah Khan and her mentally retarded daughter and the relationship between the two of them. “And that’s sort of it in describing the story,” Gene says, flipping his right turn signal.

“Except Hannah Khan was dying.”

Gene remembers the story because he edited it for *Tropic*, the *Miami Herald*’s Sunday magazine. It was 1983 and he was still a newbie in Florida, editing narrative journalism before he’d

really written any of his own. A poem inside Madeleine Blais' piece stuck out:

*I wanted to write about the old men
Who look at the dinner menu for a long time,
And then ordered doughnuts and coffee.*

Hannah Kahn, the poem's author, says, "I wanted to say, as quickly as I could, these men were poor and could not afford to order what they wanted. A prose writer might have said the same thing, but in a more complete way. A poem is as much what you don't say and what you imply as what you do say. A poem gives the reader the chance to add to or complete the thought."

But Gene says the deepest meaning of her story is, well, deeper.

"Essentially what Madeleine Blais was saying in that story is that Hannah Khan might not have been a very good poet, but the way she raised her daughter was the most creative thing she ever did. And that achieved a level of poetry all in its own. That line was never in the story. She never said that. But the smart reader got it.

"What that story told me, though I didn't realize it until years later, is that you don't write your best line," says Gene. "You have your reader realize it."

Gene looks down at his directions again. For a 50-something speeding down the Anacostia Freeway without clear directions, Gene's tone isn't rushed. He doesn't even try to talk louder than the semis barreling past us.

"I would teach a story that ran in *The Washington Post* by Laura Blumenfeld. "There was a story about Teresa McGovern, who was George McGovern's daughter. She died of alcoholism – froze to death after falling unconscious in the snow. There was this haunting line in it where George McGovern tells Laura that he felt he had failed as a father and that it was the greatest failure of his life. Laura just let that line sit there, letting the reader understand that this is coming from a man who lost the presidency in the greatest landslide in history.

"I think I'd teach David Foster Wallace's 'Consider the Lobster.' Just because it's so f...ing great." David Foster Wallace was hired by *Gourmet* to write a piece on a lobster festival in Maine. But he decided that he didn't care that he'd been hired by *Gourmet*. He wanted it to be a piece about whether it is moral to boil these animals alive. And that's what he did – in the very magazine whose editor declared to CNN viewers that the Maine Lobster Festival was one of the best food festivals in the world.

"And what he wrote was completely haunting," Gene says.

Next up, there's "Dr. Feelgood" by Susan Wood, "which told me how much you could do with an unrestrained voice," says Gene. How much can reading one piece of journalism really change a writer? It depends on who's doing the reading. Remember Gene's stint in a Puerto Rican street gang? That was Gene's response to "Dr. Feelgood." He was drifting away from NYU, not a dropout but not a graduate, getting his journalism education one article at a time.

Susan Wood's 1971 *New York Magazine* cover story came after she spent months in a drug-induced haze of journalism, getting "vitamin shots" of amphetamines from many of Manhattan's finest Dr. Feelgoods.

Here's a taste: "We sat very close, my knees between his. He gripped my arm below the elbow with one hand and with the other found a vein instantly. I saw my own blood float into the pink fluid in the syringe. Ever so slowly, he pushed the whole mixture into my bloodstream."

That was Susan's first injection. Over the next month, she'd have dozens more, never knowing what, exactly, went into the mix. Along the way, she did more than record the facts, she went in search of the truth. And this is what got Gene's attention.

Immediately after her first injection: "The rest was lost to me in the incredible warmth that suffused me, glowed within me, and billowed against the limits of my skin and beyond. Click! Muscles bunched at the top of my neck loosened, and now I was dropping 30 floors in the Pan Am elevator and spinning on in an undulating thrill marked not by fear but by a kind of orgasm."

This "brand" of participatory journalism spoke directly to Gene (and not just because it involved getting high to get the story!). "That blew me away because it was fearless, and defined itself by no existing rules," Gene says. "It declared that there were no structural limits. She swaggered, demanding the reader's complete trust. She went undercover, lying to doctors; she outed her friends, she cavalierly dispensed pseudonyms, she made sweeping statements on the theory that she knew how it was, and was telling us. I basically believe in all this that a writer should immerse himself in the subject, figure out the truth, and tell it fearlessly. I think you must earn your readers' trust, but that if you have it, you can use it.

"Had I been Susan's editor here, I would have questioned her fiercely about a few things. Her description of her first IV shot, just poked in her

arm, bing-bang, no rubber tie-off, no alcohol, seems fanciful to me. Her description of the roomful of grotesque stereotypes gathered in the first doctor's waiting room: Boy, I dunno," he says. "But I did find this story liberating at the time, as in, *Whoa – you can really immerse yourself. You can just tell it like you see it.*" Gene didn't go to journalism school; he bought it on the newsstand.

"Maybe, for off the deep end, something by Hunter Thompson to also talk about voice." Not just something by Hunter S. Thompson. *The thing by Hunter S. Thompson.* Two months after he read Dr. Feelgood, Gene shelled out 60 cents for Issue 95 of *Rolling Stone*. Its cover? "Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas."

Everyone's read "Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas." Listing it in a magazine writing curriculum is as original as thanking God, your mother and your record company after winning a Grammy. The real gem of the class – the part that doesn't leave the audience yawning or the orchestra playing you off the stage – comes when you immerse yourself in Gene's own work.

ERIC KNAUS STARTED HIS SUNDAY like so many others; he left his Bethesda bachelor pad for a pack of smokes and the Sunday paper. But something was different this Sunday. Eric, aka The Great Zucchini, was the Sunday paper. It was 29 degrees that morning with a steady 15 mph wind, but when D.C.'s top children's entertainer picked up his copy of *The Washington Post*, he felt burned.

As he began to read "The Peekaboo Paradox," Gene's 8,500-word narrative on Eric, he thought spending a few months with Gene for the story was time well spent. Then he got to – you guessed it – the kicker: "This unmarried, 35-year-old community college dropout makes more than \$100,000 a year, with a two-day workweek. Not bad for a complete idiot."

There it was. "Complete idiot." But it got worse: Eric's a gambler who needs help, he's nearly always short on cash, and he once "dated" a single mom he met while entertaining at a child's birthday party.

Eric called Gene. "His initial reaction was horror," Gene says. "I'd told him everything that was going to be in it. He said, 'But I just didn't expect it to be this ... long.'"

When I ask Eric what it's like to have your life dissected for a million readers, he has no idea that I've talked to Gene about this.

"Oh, Gene was great. He's a great guy." Yeah right.

So I ask again. Same answer.

Then again, two days later. Yep. Gene's still "great."

But I know this isn't the case. I know that after he read "Peekaboo Paradox" that Sunday, he called Gene convinced that his career as a put-a-diaper-on-my-head-to-get-a-laugh children's entertainer were over. And now Eric knows that I know.

"Well, yeah. He really got inside me. But I wasn't that worried."

Gene spent six months with the guy, and he even drove Eric to Atlantic City for late-night gambling trips. You might say this sounds an awful lot like staging a story. Gene says it is, and that there's not a single thing wrong with it. Back in the '70s, he read a series in the *Chicago Sun Times* on graft in the city's licensing of bars. The paper's approach got them pilloried by the powers-that-be in journalism: They bought a bar, named it The Mirage and staffed it full of reporters who recorded every city employee who'd come in asking for a bribe. Gene remembers reading all this "tut-tutting from the custodians of journalism" about how there were other, more ethical, ways of doing the story.

Gene was a young editor at the time. "All I could think was: *Why would you do it any other way? That's a great way to do it.*" Gene took the technique and ran with it. One of the first big stories he wrote at *The Detroit Free Press* came after his editor got a tip that the state licensing exam for auto mechanics was too easy, certifying the dumbest of the dumb to fix cars across the state. There are many ways to do that story, but Gene – an auto-repair neophyte – decided to take the test for himself.

The lead of his story the next day: "Yesterday I knew almost nothing about what an auto mechanic does. Today, I am one."

"I don't find any problem with manufacturing situations, I do it with glee, and I've done it my whole life. As an editor, I'd do it all the time."

Take, for instance, Joshua Bell.

It started with a simple question: *If a world-renowned musician stood right in front of a group of distracted people, would anyone notice?* Gene's method was middle school science fair simple, but the result, "Pearls for Breakfast," won him a Pulitzer. Gene arranged for Bell to play in the D.C. Metro's L'Enfant plaza during rush hour, just to see if anyone would notice. Did they? Read the piece. But Gene got more mail about that piece than any other he's written. "That one hit people in an oddly personal way that I hadn't anticipated." Personal, as in people were crying

as they read it. But most people who know about the Joshua Bell story never read it fully. They read something else. "This miserable thing that went out on the web that was supposed to be inspirational. A total of maybe 300 words summarizing the piece, they had nine factual errors in there!"

IT'S BEEN JUST A 15-MINUTE DRIVE across the 11th Street Bridge and down the Anacostia Freeway, and that we've made it here without resorting to illegal U-turns is a small miracle.

As we whiz by the security hut, a middle-aged woman busts through the glass door. "WAIIT! STOP!!"

Like a shrill schoolhouse bell, our class is over.

This is Gene's idea of a field trip: The Blue Plains Advanced Wastewater Treatment Plant is a sprawling complex of settling pools, purification tanks and discharge pipes spread across 150 acres of the Potomac's shore, four miles south of the Jefferson Memorial. Its sole purpose: to turn D.C.'s liquefied poop into something a bit less repulsive.

And Gene doesn't disappoint. From the minute he got the call from the sewage plant's PR guy, he knew he'd been given a gift. Not only is Dave Barry's walrus penis bone a half inch longer than Gene's, Dave also has a sewage treatment plant named after him.

After a 30-minute lecture from George Hawkins, the D.C. Water Department's bureaucrat-in-chief (he greeted us while standing in front of a framed portrait of himself in the lobby and then proceeded to walk us through no fewer than six poster-sized, jargon-laced diagrams of how D.C. purifies its poop), we step outside to find an entire entourage of bureaucrats and a fleet of white vans. We all put on white plastic hard hats emblazoned with the department's new logo – a smiley-faced blue water droplet – and head to a building called the oh-so-delicately named "Grit Removal Room." In everyday terms, it's the building where flushed goldfish end up.

Gene emails me the finished piece a few days later: His manipulation paid off. Alan the PR guy and the rest of the sewage treatment staff played right into his hand.

Here's part of Gene's

piece in *The Washington Post Magazine*:

"I don't want to put words in your mouth," I said, "but what I am hearing is that this plant is bigger than the Dave Barry Sewage Lifting Station 16 in Grand Forks, North Dakota."

George blinked, looked around for help. "Yes, it is!" said Alan. "It is a lot bigger."

But two can play this game, and the sewage guys get the last laugh, as Gene faithfully reports at his own expense.

This room, the grit removal chamber, was to be my shrine.

With a flourish, George uncovered a sign on the wall to reveal a bronze plaque declaring these the official "Gene Weingarten Grit Removal Screens." Our small entourage of hard-hatted sewage workers applauded.

Okay, it wasn't the whole room. It was just the screens themselves. But they do some mighty important work.

All in all, I was totally choked up. I'm pretty sure some of it was emotion. ☺

Illustrations appear courtesy of Eric Shansby and The Washington Post.

