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What's In Your Back Seat?
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It's impossible to predict what experience or observation will be pulled from memory to finish a scene or flesh out a character. Nor can anyone predict when a great idea will knock on the door of consciousness. So it's important to be aware, ready. Being open to the unusual, like observing the contents of automobile back seats, is one exercise writers can use to be mentally alert.

Have you ever taken the time to look into the back seat of the car next to yours in the parking lot? Much like looking into someone's cart in the check out lane at the grocery store, the items you see say a lot about the person who chose them.

Some backseats are easy to decipher. A minivan at the zoo was covered with two, matching car seats, graham cracker squares, and chunky books. On the floor was a collapsible stroller, three disposable diapers, a discarded bottle of formula, and assorted stuffed animals.

At a stop light I saw a woman talking on her cell phone and flipping through the pages of a calendar. A quick peek into her back seat and I wasn't surprised to see an overnight delivery service envelope, a newspaper, a box of file folders, a gym bag with a pair of tennis shoes twisted over one handle, and two crumpled fast food bags.

Other backseats are more mysterious. I wasn't sure what to make of the owner whose car had a roll of paper towels, 50 pound bag of bird seed, wheel chair, lap top computer, rusted out mail box, two stacks of phone books and five large containers of plastic beads. I took my time loading and positioning packages in my car while keeping an eye on the vehicle in question with

hopes of catching a glimpse of the driver. I actually considered waiting for a while but the melting ice cream and images of being questioned by a cop for stalking made me abandon the stake out idea.

Clean back seats make me suspicious. I know people who take great pride in their cars and keep them neater than their homes. But even these Type-A personalities have a map organizer protruding from a seat pocket or a box of tissues securely fastened to the floor in some kind of Velcro holder. The spotless back seats reveal nothing, there are no clues to read. The nothingness could be interpreted as something but I'm not sure what to make of it. So until I make the acquaintance of someone with a spotless backseat who can enlighten me, I'll continue to wonder.

Someday I will have such an experience because I'm always on the lookout, peeking, observing, curious. Whether I use my back-seat-snooping for a specific purpose, the exercise of looking is what really matters. The next time a great idea lands at my feet I'll see it because my eyes are open and I'm paying attention.

By the way, what's in your back seat?

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