

# THE VELLUM UNDERGROUND

Number 2

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# **THE VELLUM UNDERGROUND**

Against my better judgment, I took a creative nonfiction class in grad school. The students, teacher, and subject matter annoyed me to no end. One thing that did stick with me all these years was the debate we had concerning embellishments. To make writing more accessible (not boring), is it okay to say the barn you grew up in was red, even if you don't remember the exact color? What if it was brown? Is it a lie to misrepresent something you don't remember just to add color to your prose? Yes, it is. If your life in the barn isn't interesting enough to write about on its own without having to 'spice it up,' then get another hobby.

However, if you really thought the barn was red because that's the way you see it in your memories, I guess that's forgivable. I bring this up as a disclaimer of sorts. The way we remember things is often different from the way other people remember them. We tried to represent the truth the best we could in these pages, but sometimes the red barn we mentioned was actually a brown ranch-style house in Kansas City (we just thought we lived in a barn because that's what our parents asked us when we forgot to close the front door).

There is still no cost for this zine (unless found on a store shelf). Trades are welcomed, but not required. Subscriptions are still not available. Issue three is almost done. But after that? Who knows? We still have a website ([www.thevellumunderground.com](http://www.thevellumunderground.com)), but it's as static as the exercise bike in my bedroom.

Comments or concerns? Send an email to [info@thevellumunderground.com](mailto:info@thevellumunderground.com) or stamp-up an envelope and send it to P.O. Box 250382, Plano, TX 75025-0382. (Critiques are welcome, as well. Though if you are just writing to say you can do better, don't waste the energy on us. Prove it.)

Thanks for reading.

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## Other People's Words

When I approached Jeff with the idea of starting a literary journal, he was enthusiastic. He especially liked the idea of having a showcase for our own writing. He suggested that when one of us created the first line, the other one would write a story, which would then become the first story for a particular issue.

It was a great idea and one that didn't excite me for several reasons.

I jumped into this game we call writing with the thought that all I had to do was put some words on the page, find someone who liked them enough to publish them, then sit back and wait for the fame and fortune to arrive.

Okay, I wasn't naïve enough to know fame and fortune might never follow, but I didn't realize that only half the job of being a writer has to do with writing. The other ninety percent is shameless self-promotion.

I don't like talking about myself,\* and I don't like reading my writing aloud. The idea of a potential book tour terrified me.

The writers who go out into the world and make an effort – attend conferences, visit bookstores, author articles and blogs – sell the most books. I've seen it time and again.

I don't have that gene in me.

It's not just my aversion to self-promotion that turned me off the idea of including our own stories in *The First Line*. I'm a behind-the-scenes guy. I'm the words behind the actor, Martin behind The Beatles. I think one of the most important and enjoyable parts of being an editor is championing other people's work.

But I went along with Jeff's idea for several years, and I even wrote stories for *The First Line* under other names (we'll get to that in a minute), but I never felt comfortable about it.

I like publishing other people's words.

Thankfully, several fine folks agreed to send me some words for this issue, including Joe Horne, Robert L. Penick, Virginia Howard, and the lovely Robin.

You do get to spend a few minutes with me, if you'd like, but I'll be the first to admit there are others in this issue more deserving of your time.

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\* Apparently, I don't mind so much writing about myself; though even this project makes me feel a bit self-conscious.

## Episode 2: Not a Bad Idea

### Pillow Talk

I wanted to start a literary magazine for children. My first thought was to have it written by children, but I didn't want to step on *Stone Soup's* toes. Then I thought why not create a literary journal for children written by adults. It wouldn't be like *Highlights* or *Hopscotch* or even *Cricket*. It would just be stories and poems. No filler. And probably no fun. Also, I didn't think there would be enough interest from adults to get the stories we would need to keep the magazine in print.

Then, one night, just before bed, I said to Robin, "Why don't we start a magazine based on that writing exercise Jeff and I used to do, the one where we gave each other the first lines and the other had to write a one-page story."

Seven years earlier, while we were living in Maryland, Jeff had come out for a working visit. There was a construction expo in D.C., and Jeff was writing for a magazine called *Equipment World*, which was published out of our alma mater's hometown, Tuscaloosa. While we were driving around D.C., I came out to him about wanting to be a writer, the first person I told other than Robin.

He said that his passion was not writing about John Deere products but producing prose, and he told us about the scene in *Out of Africa* (his favorite movie at the time) when Robert Redford proclaims at dinner, "We should have a story." Meryl Streep answers: "When I tell a story to my nieces at home, one of them always provides the first sentence."

He suggested that Robin should give us a first line and he and I could write a story together based on it.

Robin thought it was a good idea and gave us:

*I made it just in time.*

Jeff and I spent the next couple of days writing a terrible story about an alien who jumped from person to person just before they committed suicide. We called it "The Joyride," and it was bad.

But we had fun; so, before Jeff left, he said we should keep it going. He proposed that at the end of every letter we wrote, we had to include a first line that the other one would use to write a story before they started their letter. The rules were simple: You had ten minutes to write a one-page story, and you couldn't change the first line.

That little game lasted for several years, and a couple of the stories that sprung from those first lines were actually published.

Eventually, our letter writing came to an end as the writing demands of our jobs and school, our growing families, and the advent of that new fangled thing called

email, crept into our lives.

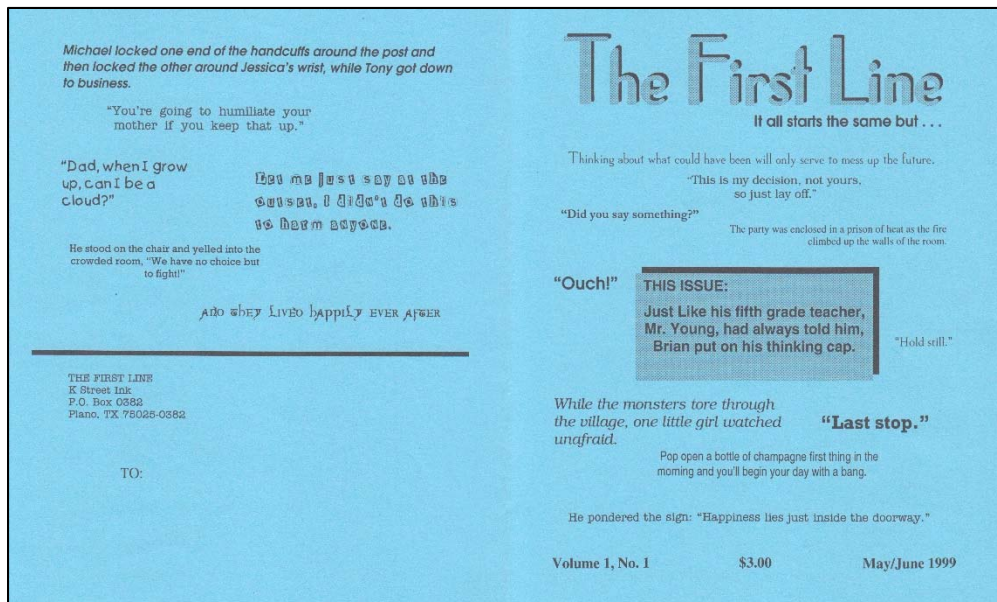
Back to the bed in Texas, Robin liked my plan, and after we bounced around some ideas, I said we should ask Jeff to help.

## Building a Dream

Jeff and his husband, Will, were living in New York, at the time. Jeff had magazine experience, and since *The First Line* sprung from our writing exercises, I asked him to join as publisher and co-editor. Will had put some time behind a Kinko's counter, so we made him production manager (though it was more of an honorary title and only lasted for the first five issues), and Robin's designation was business coordinator. She would be in charge of the finances and getting the stories together for Jeff and me to read.<sup>†</sup>

The four of us got down to the business of building a magazine. We created K Street Ink, which was named after the street in D.C. we were driving down when Robin came up with the first first line. The title was easy, and Jeff came up with our tagline: "It all starts the same, but...".

Jeff and I worked on the look and feel. We decided on legal-sized paper folded and stapled, with a lightweight, brightly colored cover. For the cover, we had an idea to use famous first lines in different fonts, but after some thought as to the copyright implications of using other writers' words, we decided to reprint the first lines we created over the years for each other to use.



<sup>†</sup> It was a terrible title for someone who had her hands in everything, even at eight months pregnant and raising a toddler who wasn't able to speak. She later became manuscript coordinator until the fall of 2008 when her titles began to reflect her true contributions to the journal.

Contact [info@thevellumunderground.com](mailto:info@thevellumunderground.com) for a complete copy.