

Prose Critique #4

Clarify impossible physical descriptions



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Welcome to Prose Critique, in which I critique an excerpt for grammar and style. Style is subjective, so my notes won't resonate with everyone, but I hope that they'll help writers learn how to focus their writing to convey meaning in the boldest, clearest, most interesting way possible.

In this excerpt, two characters talk about how one met his best friend. My notes touch on how word choice can help with quick characterization. Leaning into small, unique details can separate a story from other, similar stories in the same genre. I've also pointed out places where the description of the characters' actions are too difficult to picture. (The voiceover version of this article includes a longer explanation of my notes.)



He buries his face in his hands at the memory, **grinning through his palms**¹, the damn **golf pencil still between his fingers like a cigarette**². “We looked like Mike and Sully walking around our orientation. Lanyards and all. But in spite of that, it took all of three minutes for us to become brothers. Which neither of us had, by the way.”

I have half a million follow-up questions, but this **tidbit alone feels like a gem, this small kernel of Eli**³. I watch his fingers twist a straw wrapper. I ask the question that’s burning me up. “You have a sister?”

“I do.” He nods. “And Roscoe has *five*.”⁴

“You talk about him like he’s a storybook character,” I say. “Or a **Disney prince**.”⁵

There’s something sad, maybe a little wistful, in his smile. “He pretty much is,” he sighs. “Total opposite of me. **He’s a Leo**⁶, so he’s never been shy a day in his life. He’s handsome, he’s tall. He’s an incredible soccer player, probably the best drummer I know.”

“Sounds like *you’d* marry him, if you could,” I tease, nudging his foot under the table.

“There is a lot of mutual love, you know?” And I do know: I can see it, steady and sincere in his **seaglass eyes**. ⁷ He runs a hand through his bedhead hair. “But I couldn’t. Can’t stand his driving. Only his to-be-betrothed has the nerves of steel required for that.” He takes a long sip of his tea, **then shifts into one of his intensely curious stares**. ⁸ “What about you?”

I tug at my earring. “Oh, I never want to drive.” **It’s like, the number one cause of death in America.** ⁹

A laugh pops out of him. ¹⁰ “Spoken like a true New Yorker,” Eli says. “But I meant your best friend. Did she leave you to run off with Mr. Right?”

For a moment, **I blink at him, paralyzed.** ¹¹

The truth is...embarrassing.

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- ¹ I can’t picture this. Is he grinning INTO his palms? If she can see his grin THROUGH his palms, then his palms are translucent.
 - ² This I can definitely picture. It works well.
 - ³ I think this gets close to mixing metaphors, but since a tidbit/kernel only FEELS like a gem, I think it works.
 - ⁴ Italicizing works well here because it’s a concise way to imply how the speaker feels about someone having five sisters.
 - ⁵ I like their banter.
 - ⁶ It’s nice that this gives us insight into both the character he’s talking about and the character who’s speaking; the speaker knows a bit about astrology and buys into it at least casually.
 - ⁷ A brief description, but clear and easy to picture.
 - ⁸ I’m not quite sure how to feel about this phrase. How does someone “shift into” a stare? Would “gives me” work better? Or would it be better to describe his body language instead of his stare, since a physical stance is something a person can “shift into”?
 - ⁹ Funny! I’m guessing there’s more to it than this, but I like the characterization.
 - ¹⁰ Easy to picture and to hear.
 - ¹¹ If she’s blinking, she’s not paralyzed. Maybe “I stare at him, paralyzed”?