MABEL HAS A WONDERFUL IDEA. UNFORTUNATELY, THAT'S ALL SHE HAS.

Article Series 1 of 10

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The idea arrived on a Tuesday afternoon in January, somewhere between the frozen peas and the custard creams.

Mabel Thornbury stopped her trolley so suddenly that the man behind her had to swerve into the tinned soup.

"A cake," she said. "Somebody steals a cake."

The man agreed that this would be very upsetting, and went on his way.

Mabel had retired the previous autumn after thirty-one years in the wages office at Hollis's biscuit factory. She had spent those years persuading columns of figures to agree with one another, and she had promised herself that retirement would be when she finally wrote a novel. She had bought three blue notebooks for the purpose. Until that moment beside the freezers, all three had been empty.

By the time she reached home, the idea had grown. There would be a village. There would be a cake competition. Someone would steal the winning entry, and a retired florist would find out who.

She wrote it on the first page of the first notebook, underlined it twice, and sat back to admire it.

Then she looked at it for quite a long time.

It was a lovely idea. It simply had no idea what to do next.

An idea is not yet a story

Most writers have more ideas than they could use in a lifetime. An idea is usually a situation, an image or a question: a stolen cake, a lighthouse, a woman who wakes up speaking Portuguese. It can be charming and still sit on the page like a guest who has arrived early and doesn't know where to put their coat.

A story needs moving parts. Someone wants something. Something stands in the way. The outcome matters to somebody.

A premise is a short statement that puts those parts together. It isn't a blurb, and it isn't a summary of every chapter. Think of it as a working agreement between you and your book, one you can test before you have written eighty thousand words that depend on it.

Ask whose story it is

"A retired florist" is a job description. Mabel spent an evening finding out who this particular florist might be.

Her name became Iris Penhallow. She was sixty-eight, and she had run Penhallow's Petals on the High Street for forty years. She knew who sent lilies after a funeral and who sent roses without a card. Since selling the shop, she had found herself with an empty diary and a growing suspicion that the village had stopped needing her.

That last detail mattered more than the lilies. A protagonist works best when they bring a situation of their own to the story, something the plot can press on. A stolen cake is a puzzle. A stolen cake that gives a lonely woman a reason to matter again is the beginning of a novel.

Find the want and the trouble

What does Iris want? To find out who took the cake.

Why her, and not the police? Because PC Mott considers a missing lemon drizzle beneath his dignity, and the show committee would like the whole business forgotten before anyone outside the village hears about it.

What stands in her way? The people she has known for decades suddenly don't want to answer her questions.

What could she lose? Friendships. Her place in the village. Possibly the show itself.

Stakes don't have to involve the end of the world. They have to matter to the people involved. A reader who loves a village mystery can care about a lemon drizzle as much as another reader cares about a stolen warhead, provided the characters care first.

Try the one-sentence test

A useful shape for a premise runs roughly like this: when something happens, a particular character must pursue a goal, or something important will be lost, but an obstacle makes it difficult.

It is a tool, not a law. Plenty of good books don't fit it neatly. But trying to fill it in quickly shows you which parts you haven't decided yet.

Mabel's first attempt read: "A cake is stolen and a florist investigates."

This was accurate. So is "A woman buys some peas."

Her third attempt went further:

"When the seven-time champion's lemon drizzle vanishes from the Much Marrowby Summer Show, retired florist Iris Penhallow sets out to find the thief, but every suspect is an old friend, and every question she asks risks the place in the village she is afraid she has already lost."

It was longer. It was also a story.

Check it against the shelf

Before you commit, ask who the book is for, and whether your premise offers what those readers are hoping to find.

Mabel's library loans told her a great deal. Cosy mysteries usually feature an amateur sleuth, a close community and a puzzle the reader can try to solve. Violence is kept off the page or left out altogether, and order is restored by the end. Mabel's premise fitted, with one wrinkle: most of the books she borrowed involved a murder. A theft would need to feel serious within the village, even if nobody outside it would look up from their newspaper.

That wasn't a reason to abandon the idea. It was something to keep in mind.

See whether it can grow

One last test: can the premise carry a whole novel? Mabel wrote a list of ways things could get worse for Iris. Suspicion could fall on her. An old friendship could crack. The committee could cancel next year's show. She stopped at nine, mostly because the kettle had boiled.

If you struggle to reach three, the idea may be a short story, which is a perfectly respectable thing for an idea to be.

Mabel copied her premise onto an index card and fixed it to the fridge with a magnet shaped like a strawberry.

Doreen from next door saw it through the kitchen window and tapped on the glass.

"Who did it?"

"I have no idea," said Mabel.

Doreen nodded approvingly. "Best way to start," she said, and went back to her bins.

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