



CHILL OR FRAUD?
A NOVEL

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By. Carmen Petaccio

My whole life I've been a fraud.
--David Foster Wallace

Chill or Fraud?

Am I chill...or fraud?
For years and years I asked everyone I saw.
“Chill?” I’d ask them. “Or fraud?”
I asked my mom, my bros, the whole staff at the corner bodega. I asked my professors and coworkers and strangers at the gym. The answer never varied.

“Chill,” they’d always say.
“Totally chill,” they’d assure me.

This is, of course, the worst response in the universe to hear. That’s the problem with your own chill-or-fraud-ness: you can’t assess it on your own, and you can’t trust the assessments of the people you ask. No chill would ever tell you you’re not chill to your face. In the end, you’re just left with yourself and the question and doubt.

It’s so goddamn fraud.

The known world comprises three primary elements: people, places, and things. Each of these elements can be further classified into a two categories. One of the categories is chill; the other category is fraud. That’s it. There is no purer way to view the world.

For example, there are chill people, and there are also fraud people. Prince, for example, is chill. As is Philip Roth, as is Oppenheimer, even though he’s dead. Conversely, Lebron James is fraud. The same goes for late capitalism, and the popular folk quartet Mumford & Sons.

Here are some chill places: the corner bodega, New Jersey, the platform of the Bedford stop on the L Train. And some fraud places: all banks, LA, every inch of Williamsburg excluding the platform of the Bedford stop on the L Train. The ruffled skyscrapers on the cover of Wilco’s *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot* are certainly chill, while the Guantanamo Bay Terrorist Prison is definitely fraud.

As for things, Netflix is chill and Hulu is fraud. Jenga, podcasts, and unseeded grapes are chill, chill, and chill. Bananagrams, talk radio, and seeded grapes are all fraud.

In these instances the binary is cut and dry. Subject x is clearly chill. Subject y is super fraud. This: chill. That: fraud. Okay. Life can resume happening.

But what if a person, place, or thing exists somewhere in between chill and fraud?
Like Darren Aronofsky's *The Fountain*?
Like gentrified Brooklyn?
Like me?
What then?
...
What happens then?

* * *

Is my novel chill...or fraud?

This is the question that every novelist must ask himself. Before the first word he writes, during every word that follows, after he inks the final period, he must ask himself this question.

“Chill,” the novelist must ask himself, “or fraud?”

One hundred fifty years ago, Herman Melville was sitting in his log cabin or whatever, in New England or wherever, holding his quill or whatever, staring at the blank piece of parchment or whatever on which he would write *Moby Dick*.

“Is *Moby Dick* chill,” Herman Melville asked himself, “or fraud?”

He didn’t know then, as we know now, that symbolic whales are chill. He didn’t know that Queequeg was chill, or that the Shakespearean cadence of Ahab’s apostrophes was chill. All he had was faith in the chill-ness of his idea, his stupid whale novel idea.

Which is the only way to begin a novel: with conviction. Anything less than absolute conviction in your novel’s chill-ness is a direct path to fraud-ness.

That’s why the first sentence of *Moby Dick* is in the imperative.

It’s not “Call me...Ishmael?”

It’s “Call me Ishmael.”

It’s Herman Melville saying this without saying this:

“Call me Chill.”

Thankfully, I’m not a novelist. Allow me to explain.

Ten minutes ago, I was in my twin-sized bed in my okay-sized apartment in gentrified Brooklyn. I was staring at the blank *Word* document on which I would type *Chill or Fraud?*

“Is *Chill or Fraud?* chill,” I asked myself, “or fraud?”

I didn’t know then, as I still don’t know now, whether implicitly comparing myself to Herman Melville was chill. I didn’t know whether these words were chill enough to warrant typing, or if I was fraud enough not to care if they were chill enough to warrant typing. All I had were doubts about the chill-ness of the idea, my stupid *novel* idea.

That’s why the first sentence of this *novel* is in the interrogative.

It’s not “I am chill...not fraud.”

It’s “Am I chill...or fraud?”

I’m not a novelist. I’m no Herman Melville. I never will be.

Don’t call me chill.

Call me CarCar. Some years ago—don’t you worry how many—having too much money in my checking account, and nothing particular to interest me on the Shore, I thought I would deepen myself a little and see the chilliest parts of New York City. It is a way

I have of driving off the fraud, and regulating the chill. Whenever I find myself growing grim around my handsome; whenever it is a humid, sweaty August in my soul; whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before Jersey City warehouses, and arriving early to every indie movie I attend; and especially whenever my crazy gets the better of me, that it requires an ultimate restraint to prevent me from stepping into the street, and methodically smashing people's smart phones—then I think it about time to get to the city as soon as I can. This is my substitute for prescription pills and television. With a literary flourish Melville boards the ship; I quietly take to the NJ Transit bus. There is nothing novel in this. If they only knew it, almost all men and women, some time or another, cherish very nearly the same feelings toward the chill as me.

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Was that Melville pastiche I just typed chill...or fraud?

This was the question that I asked myself twenty-ish seconds ago, when I finished typing that Melville pastiche.

“That Melville pastiche,” I asked myself. “Chill or fraud?”

Well, rereading it now, with twenty-ish seconds of hindsight, I’m liable to say, “Well, I think it’s pretty chill.”

But rereading it *now*, and taking into account whatever time has passed since I said, “Well, I think it’s pretty chill,” I think now I’d say, “Well, I think it’s pretty fraud.”

This is the perennial issue with being a novelist. You have to be able to write Melville pastiches, and you have to be able to believe those Melville pastiches are worth writing.

Other stuff, too. Everything in your novel, actually. You have to write everything and you have to believe everything you’ve written was and is chill and worth writing.

This is my perennial issue with being a novelist.

I’ll write something, and immediately after I write it, I’ll hate it and wish I hadn’t.

So I’ll delete it and I’ll write something else.

After which I’ll reread that, wish I hadn’t, and delete that.

After which I’ll write, wish, delete whatever I write after.

And on and on.

Come six hours later I’ve written nothing.

The freaking fraud of it all! My god.

Thus the *novel* was born. See, I realized what my issue was. When you write a novel today, you aren’t *actually* writing, at least not in the physical sense. What you’re doing is typing, on your phone or iPad or 15” MacBook Pro with a pink case, as I do. How can one write anything when one is typing everything? The answer is one can’t. That’s an issue.

It probably maybe relates to what Keats or Yeats or whoever said about poetry or art or whatever. Something like, “If something is beautiful, it is also true, or whatever.”

My writing could never be true, or beautiful, or and/or both, because it was, literally, not writing. It was just shitty, fraud typing, which I’d afterwards recognize as such, and delete into absent, empty nothing. Typing isn’t writing. A writer who types everything writes nothing. So all the writing I’ve ever typed is nothing. And nothing is just nothing.

This was my big realization. This was my “epiphanic moment.” This was when I realized I didn’t have “to write” a “novel.” All I had to do was type a *novel*.

I know these words will never be writing, but I am *positive* it is typing.

So I have given up on writing, and I have moved onto typing.

Allow me to demonstrate:

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Having an entire page of jibjab in the first chapter of your novel: chill...or fraud?

This is the question I asked myself twenty-ish seconds ago, when I finished typing that page of jibjab.

I was in my twin-sized bed in my okay-sized apartment in gentrified Brooklyn, asking myself this question: “That page of jibjab: chill or fraud?”

In a novel, that page of jibjab would without a doubt be fraud. There’s little in the way of character, setting, style, or plot. Nothing, in fact. In a novel, like Jonathan Franzen’s timeless classic *Freedom*, it just wouldn’t work.

In a ~~novel~~, however, it certainly, certainly does. Allow me to explain.

Back when I was ~~frauder~~, I wanted to write a novel, an epic, sprawling fictionalization of how my family imploded. I wanted to write about how my dad went to jail. I wanted to write about how my sister tried to kill his mistress. I wanted to write about the sadness my mother felt, the sadness I couldn’t in any way cure, and I wanted to write about how it all made me heartbroken for so long my heart didn’t beat, it just kind of flinched in my chest. And people all over the world would buy my novel and read it and enjoy it. It’d have three-dimensional characters. It’d have a rich setting and idiosyncratic prose. It’d have a meticulously messy plot representative of life in all its unpredictability. That was the novel I wanted to write.

Which is, of course, the fraudest thing any fraud could ever want.

Those are the empty delusions of writers, not the true, tangible art of typers.

Because, above all, the purest ~~novel~~ satisfies three stipulations.

One: No one would ever want to buy it.

Two: If someone did buy it, it would only be not to read it.

Three: If someone did read it, it would only be not to enjoy it.

Those are the three stipulations of the ~~novel~~.

Hence me publishing this for free on my blog that no one reads.

Hence the page of jibjab.

* * *

What if I ended the first chapter there? Would that be chill...or fraud?

This is the question I asked myself twenty-ish seconds ago, when I was in my twin-sized bed in my okay-sized apartment in gentrified Brooklyn.

“What if I ended the first chapter there?” I asked myself. “Chill or fraud?”

Well, as an end to the first chapter of a ~~novel~~, it seems somewhat chill; if, at the same time, somewhat fraud. A bit of both, I suppose. Not bad for the first chapter of a ~~novel~~.

Which is more than I can say for the first chapter of my novel.

Allow me to explain.

When I tried to write my novel, I found I couldn’t get past the first paragraph. I’d intended it to be a snapshot of a childhood memory, one that would, upon further inspection, reveal an entire family history, before launching the reader into the present. But nothing on the screen ended up as true or beautiful and/or both as it appeared in my head.

So I never got past that paragraph. Though I still think about it, the beginning of my novel.

Do you want to know how I would have started it?

This is how I would have started it:

“My Memom had blue hair.”

That’d be the first sentence, and then the story would go from there.

Like this:

My Memom had blue hair. I don't care whether that interests you or not because it's true. Before I was born, my Memom tried to dye her white hair black, but she botched the dye job, and her white hair turned blue. And being a bit of a kook she liked it, so she left it. Then when I was a little CarCar my parents would drive me in their station wagon to see my Memom's big, blue hair at her house—also blue—on the Barnegat Bay, in New Jersey. She'd be at the stove, stirring the contents of a ravioli pot, and I'd run in, all excited. I'd hug the side of her leg a fast hello and rush to the red retro fridge, where she hid the Yoo-hoos for me special. On those hot-breeze summer days I wouldn't swim in the bay, like my sister and cousins did. I wouldn't listen to opera with my Pop-Pop, or ride jet skis with my dad or take Polaroids with my mom. What'd I do is this. I'd lean against the doorframe that gave a full view of the kitchen, of its lace-curtained window and communal table and raspy screen door. So happy sipping my Yoo-hoo, I'd watch the ravioli steam wind like eels through my Memom's blue hair. I'd listen to her hum "A Bushel and a Peck," all hums, no words. I'd lean against the doorframe, and I'd think about how her blue hair sat atop her head like her blue house sat atop the earth, like everything was a miniature of a bigger, greater everything. I remember it now like I'm living it now, two decades later. I really don't care whether it interests you or not. My Memom had blue hair, and on the day she died, the saddest day of life I've known so far, her hair was flat and lifeless, as white as a page.

That's how I would have started it.