the conditional mode, involving looking, kissing, and drinking. The second, beginning midway through, tells a more elaborate story of flowers that were sent, breathed on, returned, and now flourish, smelling of his beloved.

Narrative capability shows up in infants some time in their third or fourth year, when they start putting verbs together with nouns.[4] Its appearance coincides, roughly, with the first memories that are retained by adults of their infancy, a conjunction that has led some to propose that memory itself is dependent on the capacity for narrative. In other words, we do not have any mental record of who we are until narrative is present as a kind of armature, giving shape to that record. If this is so, then "[o]ur very definition as human beings," as Peter Brooks has written, "is very much bound up with the stories we tell about our own lives and the world in which we live. We cannot, in our dreams, our daydreams, our ambitious fantasies, avoid the imaginative imposition of form on life."[5] The gift of narrative is so pervasive and universal that there are those who strongly suggest that narrative is a "deep structure," a human capacity genetically hard-wired into our minds in the same way as our capacity for grammar (according to some linguists) is something we are born with.[6] The novelist Paul Auster once wrote that "A child's need for stories is as fundamental as his need for food."[7] For anyone who has read to a child or taken a child to the movies and watched her rapt attention, it is hard to believe that the appetite for narrative is something we learn rather than something that is built into us through our genes.

Narrative and time

Whatever the final word may be regarding the source of this gift for narrative – whether from nature or from nurture or from some complex combination of the two – the question remains: what does narrative do for us? And the first answer is that it does many things for us, some of which we will go into in later chapters. But if we had to choose one answer above all others, the likeliest is that *narrative is the principal way in which our species organizes its understanding of time*. This would seem to be the fundamental gift of narrative with the greatest range of benefits. And it certainly makes evolutionary sense. As we are the only species on earth with both language and a conscious awareness of the passage of time, it stands to reason that we would have a mechanism for expressing this awareness.

Of course, there are other ways to organize time and to express it. In our own age, the commonest of these is the mechanical timepiece: the clock or watch. But mechanical clocks have been around only since the Middle Ages. Before

that, the measurement of time was more proximate than exact. Still, there were then (as there are now and always will be) dependable non-narrative ways of organizing time: the passage of the sun, the phases of the moon, the succession of seasons, and the season cycles that we call years. Like the clock, these modes of organizing time are abstract in the sense that they provide a grid of regular intervals within which we can locate events. Narrative, by contrast, turns this process inside out, *allowing events themselves to create the order of time.* "I fell down," cries the child and in so doing gives shape to what in clock time would be roughly a second. In effect, the child carves out a piece of time, spanning her collapse and fall to the ground. This is the way time, to quote Paul Ricoeur, becomes "human time": "Time becomes human time to the extent that it is organized after the manner of a narrative; narrative, in turn, is meaningful to the extent that it portrays the features of temporal existence."[8]

If we extend our example just a bit, we can show how much we rely on the free exercise of narrative to shape time according to human priorities:

> The child fell down. After a while she got up and ran, until at last, seeing her mother, she burst into tears: "I fell down," she cried. "There, there," said her mother. "That must have hurt."

Here time is composed of a succession of events that appear as links in a chain: the fall, the getting up, the running, the seeing of her mother, the bursting into tears, what she said, and what her mother said. If one tries to imagine this sequence underscored by integers of clock time (--), one might come up with something like this:

> The Child fell down.
> ---
> After a while she got up and ran,
> ---
> until at last, seeing her
> ---
> mother, she burst into tears: "I fell down," she cried. "There,
> ---
> there," said her mother. "That must have hurt."
> ---

The juxtaposition of the two kinds of time makes the difference clear. Clock time, like other forms of abstract or regular time, always relates to itself, so that one speaks in terms of numbers of seconds or their multiples (minutes, hours) and fractions (nanoseconds). Narrative time, in contrast, relates to events or incidents. And while clock time is necessarily marked off by regular

intervals of a certain length, narrative time is not necessarily any length at all. In the short narrative above, for example, we could slow this whole sequence down simply by adding details, and in the process, we would have expanded time.

> The child fell down. She sat where she had fallen, her eyes frightened, her lower lip trembling. She rubbed her knee. Was it bleeding? No, but the skin was scraped. Where was her mother? Carefully, she got to her feet and started running . . .

We have not added clock time to what happened. But we have added narrative time. We have added time in the sense that we have added greater complexity of narrative shape to its passage. This complexity is a matter of the accumulation of incident. It is as if we went inside the phrase "After a while she got up and ran" and lingered there to observe a fabric of micro-events. Conversely, we can make narrative time go like the wind:

> "There, there," said her mother, "that must have hurt." In the following months, the child fell often. But slowly she acquired confidence and eventually stopped falling altogether. Indeed, as a young woman, the assurance of her gait would command attention whenever she entered a roomful of people – people who would have found it hard to imagine that this was once a little girl who fell down all the time.

Here a new narrative structure comes into place, stretching over years. Time becomes a sequential reduction of falls and the acquirement of balanced poise, while all the numerous incidents that must have marked the daily life of this child/woman are screened from view. With a few broad strokes time is now structured as the history of an acquired capability.

This gives some idea of how fluid narrative time is. Of course, it is important to acknowledge that this way of expressing time, though in a way the opposite of the many modes of regular, or abstract, time, is rarely kept in strict isolation from regular time. Notice, in the example above, that I used the phrase "In the following months," invoking the thirty-day interval with which we are all familiar. In narrative, then, though it is the incidents that give shape and that dominate our sense of time, the regularity of abstract time, which is also an integral part of all our lives, unavoidably adds its own counterpoint to the time structured by incidents. Both of these kinds of time have been with us as far back as history can trace. We have always been aware of the recurring cycles of the sun, moon, and seasons, and at the same time we have always been shaping and reshaping time as a succession of events, that is, as narrative. This unique

human ability to take control of time has certainly been useful to us in many ways and shall continue to be. But it is also, quite simply, a great pleasure in itself. The South African novelist J. M. Coetzee put this well:

> For the reader, the experience of time bunching and becoming dense at points of significant action in the story, or thinning out and skipping or glancing through nonsignificant periods of clock time or calendar time, can be exhilarating – in fact it may be at the heart of narrative pleasure. As for writing and the experience of writing, there is a definite thrill of mastery – perhaps even omnipotence – that comes with making time bend and buckle, and generally with being present when signification, or the will to signification, takes control over time.[9]

Narrative perception

Narrative is so much a part of the way we apprehend the world in time that it is virtually built in to the way we see. Filmmaker Brian De Palma put this idea even more strongly: "People don't see the world before their eyes until it's put in a narrative mode."[10] Even when we look at something as static and completely spatial as a picture, narrative consciousness comes into play. Is it possible, when "reading" the following picture, to resist some kind of narrative structuring?

We may not see a full, clear story in abundant detail (a storm arises, a ship founders and runs aground). But we do see more than a ship; we see a ship *wreck*. In other words, included in the present time of the picture is a shadowy sense of time preceding it, and specifically of narrative time – that is, time