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# Writers Anonymous

The other six writers hogged all the good seats before I got there. The chairs closest to Jonas on either side of him were already gone, forcing me to settle on the second seat away from him, on his right, at the large round table.

The burnt orange chair with its portable spotlight which was trained on our brand new instructor, Jonas Wright, a published author, and that was what you saw as soon as you entered the room. Jonas was new to the writing scene in our small town. I wasn't quite sure what he wrote, but he was published and that was all I needed to know about the man.

I spread out my own materials from my bright yellow folder onto the table in front of me, sneaking little glances at Jonas as he worried the mustache hairs sticking out over his top lip. I usually find those little spurts of hair annoying but they seemed exceedingly hot on him. His hair was seven and a half or eight weeks overdue for a cut and training itself to pouf out at a crazy angle and making him look accessible.

## Writers Anonymous

We all fell silent as we readied ourselves to become Published Authors. Even the room was prepared. It smelled of new notebooks, passionate purple Bics, anticipation and my Gloria Vanderbilt cologne.

I finally made eye contact with Jonas. I was surprised to spot a tiny nervous tic in his right eye, seemingly aggravated by unpublished authors. His eye jumped and throbbed while I stared at him, refusing to be the first one to look away. It was our initial meeting and I wanted to make him remember me. When Jonas did finally get his eye to look away he immediately looked over at the ‘Thank you for not smoking’ sign and patted his mint green suit coat pocket with disgust.

Seven reverent faces turned to look up Jonas as he stood, cleared his throat and tried out his rusty voice on us. “My name is Jonas, Jonas Wright, and I am here to listen to your writing and see what, if anything, I can do to fix your writing so that you can also be published one day.” He smiled, briefly looking around the table at each of us. “Okay, Group. We will begin on my left. Each of you will give your name and read your work in a loud, clear voice. Afterwards, we will discuss your mistakes as a group. Before we get going, are there any questions so far?”

Of course there were questions---none of us were published. We talked over each other to get our questions out there.

“Jonas, what brand of computer do you use?”

## Writers Anonymous

“Does poetry really have to rhyme?”

“What is the best time of day to write fiction?”

“Where did you buy that remarkable tie, Jonas?”

“How many commas should be in three paragraphs of poetry?”

Jonas’ right eye began to do a tango. He stared at us as much he was able until we simmered down. “Toshiba. Yes, of course. Between 8 and 11 am. K-Mart. Seven.” He glanced again at the no smoking sign with regret. “I have decided to save my own work for last so you can leave tonight with fine poetic writing ringing in your ears. Let us begin, Group.”

When she said, “My name is Lucinda Hade,” I tried not to gawk. I had never met her but I had been reading her letters to the editor for years. Her letters all reeked of someone in the midst of a psychotic episode. Once I saw her close up, it all began to make sense. She had on an orange sweatshirt, orange blush and bright orange lipstick. Lucinda did, however, add an element of surprise for her audience by donning her orange sweatshirt both backwards and inside out with the tag telling the world she was wearing a size 14 sweatshirt made in El Salvador.

Lucinda brought one of her classics to share with us---a real oldie but goodie. It dealt with secretary pools and why it was a bad idea to give them their own pool when no one else had one. It was the worst kind of favoritism. Lucinda felt it was

## Writers Anonymous

unconscionable for secretaries to be lying around, getting tanned, while the rest of the company had to sit in little cubicles. I was so pleased. I figured that when she finished reading that Jonas would ask her to see someone with the authority to commit her.

When Lucinda finished reading, Jonas took a second to compose his eye, turning to us with a serious face. “This is a good example of editorializing. Tight. Compact. Shows an open mind.”

The Unpublished looked at each nervously when we realized there was no punchline coming. A slight hesitation and then...applause. I timed my clapping to be one longer than the rest of the applause. When Lucinda looked over at me, I smiled and gave her the ‘thumbs up’ sign. She smiled back, Jonas nodded his approval but everyone else glared at me. I ignored them.

Jonas continued, “One hint, Lucinda. Next time, could you possibly write more in the realm of accepted subjects in literature? I have found that unrequited love sells best.”

All of the Unpublished wrote that down.

Sherrie Perry sat hunched protectively over her frayed white folder. She jumped and kind of gasped when it was pointed out that it was her turn. I think she was surprised that we had seen her sitting there.

## Writers Anonymous

“I write poetry,” Sherrie said in a tasteless, muffled jello-ish voice. She brought a program from her tenth high school reunion as proof that she had a right to be at a meeting of writers. She opened her folder to expose the grimy, tattered cover of the program. At the bottom of the program was a four-line poem which was yellowed, crumpled and lovingly re-straightened more times than was probably good for it. It rhymed. She read through her poem four times so we could get her cleverly hidden meanings. I stopped listening after the third time.

There was a minor hissing sound as soon as Sherrie Perry stopped mumbling and the room let out a single breath of relief.

When Jonas finally got both of his eyes to behave he said, “Bravo. Truly remarkable. Short and to the point, but then all good writing is. The best part of all, Sherrie, is that it rhymes. You have discovered the essence of good, solid writing.” I thought to myself that at last we were getting somewhere. Short and rhyming. That was the secret... But as I cheered for her it came to me that I had a problem since my own work was 7,218 words and not one of them rhymed.

A hand raised in the air interrupted my lamenting. The hand belonged to Mrs. Krabbe, my old fifth-grade teacher. I was really pleased to see her as a member of the writing group. It would be wonderful to be on equal footing with her. I am an adult now---not some smart-alecky kid who had to sit in the front row because it was easier

## Writers Anonymous

to control me there. It would be pleasant to converse with her about our common interest. Plus, I would also be able to call her by her first name---Grace.

“My name is Mrs. Krabbe. I would like to bring to your attention, Mr. Wright, that someone is chewing gum. The sign outside this room clearly states, ‘No gum chewing or spitting on the floor’. We must follow the rules.” She gave me a look straight from a rock quarry. I swallowed my Juicy Fruit as I casually looked around the room for the vile offender along with the rest of the group.

“Thank you for bringing this sensitive issue to us, Mrs. Krabbe. That is the secret to good writing, isn’t it? Discipline.” Jonas’ one eye froze on me. I met his gaze, shook my head slowly in disgust at the heinous crime and tried my best to look gumless.

We moved on. Dressed completely in mousy brown from her limp, lifeless hair down to her fake leather shoes, Dee said in a monotone, “My name is Dee. Just Dee. Like Cher. Or Elvis. I write descriptive stories.” It sounded interesting at first but after listening to her describe a country setting for a solid eighteen minutes my interest began to wane.

The farmhouse was not just a farmhouse to Dee. It was ‘big, old, falling down around its foundation, greying, hidden, peeling, large, ancient, reddish-brown, shuttered, open pored, drafty, dormered, dirty, uncared for, windy, sagging, loveless, lopsided and catty-wampass.’”

## Writers Anonymous

The Unpublished were all feeling sorry for ourselves as we waited in vain for Dee's voice to raise or lower, just once, in the whole eighteen minutes. There was a moment's delay from when she sat down until the room came alive. It was like a video game put on pause which suddenly started again when the play button was pushed.

“Oh my, what a fantastic job, Dee. Imagine seeing all that in such minuteness! One thing. Wouldn't it be so much more meaningful if it rhymed, Group? Perhaps you could revise it and bring it to our next meeting.” I couldn't believe this. Another entry in the Great American Bore-Off. In rhyme? Tears of self-pity were welling in my eyes until I realized Jonas hadn't objected to the length of Dee's work. Great. My 7218 words might be safe if I could think of some rhymes.

I was getting ready to start jotting down rhymes when the guy the other side of me, Number 7, struggled to open up a small roll of Tums. When he saw me look at him, he explained, “Stuffed peppers. I keep on telling my wife not to make them. I suffer all night long with heartburn every time.” I amused myself by picturing his wife listening to his squeaky voice with fear etched on her face. “I'll do anything you ask, honey, just please don't whine again.” He looked all white and pasty. I bet he was something under the covers.

I whispered back to him, “I know what you mean. They give me heartburn, too.”

## Writers Anonymous

A hand began waving wildly across the table and a mean old shaky voice said, “Excuse me for interrupting, Mr. Wright, but right in the middle of your interesting instructions I observed two people talking and I knew you would disapprove.”

Gracie baby sat back in her chair and crossed her old wrinkled liver-spotted arms.

Jonas stood up and place both of his hands with exaggerated patience on the table. He leaned over the table with only his face eerily staring out from the spotlight. His eyes, almost beyond his control by now, sought me out. I sat with my lips pinched together so tightly they were turning numb. I felt fourteen eyes looking at me in shocked disapproval.

I have never been so sorry in my whole life that I couldn’t rhyme.

I knew I was in a ton of trouble with my non-rhyming, 7218-word fiasco but Number 7, my talking partner, seemed to be taking his rebuke pretty badly. He was breathing hard and sweating like crazy. I figured his work must really be shitty.

The next writer was Anne Leyley, passionate citizen of the United States of America, self-appointed treasurer of all monies for all public offices and avid letter writer to every person who held those public offices. She had an eight-inch pile of copies of her best letters and emails in front of her. Apparently, Anne had made it her business to send her thoughts to every single person she could think of who accepted a dime of the public’s money. Every letter in the stack started with “Shame



## Writers Anonymous

on you,” and ended with “Shame on me for giving you the money to do this. You will not get another cent from me.”

After about twenty-four or twenty-five letters, Jonas said, “Well, now, umm, this certainly shows us a different point of view, Anne. And its...oh, I get it...it’s an attempt at humor. Humor is bad. People are not as funny as they think they are. That was a normal mistake. You have fallen into a normal trap. Leave the jokes to Tina Fey.”

Jonas seemed to roll this whole thing over in his mind for a few seconds and then he said, “I know what we can do. Bring us in a nice normal poem and we’ll forget all about this unfortunate incident and get back to normal.” Jonas smiled and winked at her with his good eye. He seemed to think if he said the word ‘normal’ around her enough, she would become it. I saw the look on her face and I knew he was barking up the wrong looney bin.

I rolled some of her goofiest letters around in my head to amuse myself. She sure was... Wait just a minute. Humor is bad? Humor is bad? I have a 7218-word humorous short story and Jonas is already upset over the gum and the talking. Oh man, maybe I can try to make it rhyme and take out anything that was funny before it was my turn to read.

I think the mental sparring with Anne had taken its toll on Jonas. He pulled out a pack of Winstons from the pocket of his mint green sports coat, tamped out

## Writers Anonymous

three of the brown filtered cigarettes and placed a gold lighter on the table beside them.

“We have much to digest, Group. It’s 8:10. Let’s take a twenty-minute break. You should use this time to practice your writing skills and when we get back together we will finish up the last half of the group. I am going outside to meditate.” He carefully picked up his meditation materials and headed for higher ground.

I used my time constructively. I crossed off words without a second thought, rhymed any words that were left and killed punchlines wherever they lurked.

Grace was moaning around about the break running 34 minutes when Jonas strolled back into the room reeking of meditation and holding a handout for us to take home.

The name of the handout he gave to each of us was Rules for Good Writing by Jonas Wright, Published Author.

1. Sit up nice and straight while writing so that your thoughts have a clear shot at your brain.
2. Never chew gum while writing. It saps your creativity.
3. Poetry is the best form of writing...if it rhymes.
4. Never swear in your writing. If your children or parents read it, you will have some pretty high explaining to do.

## Writers Anonymous

5. Bathe often. Water is inspirational. A clean body= clean sentences.
6. Keep it short.
7. Do not use humor in writing.
8. There are certain subjects that should not be discussed in your writing. See me for a complete list.

Jonas went outside again to meditate while we digested the rules. I watched Dee's lips move as she read the handout and tried desperately to make it apply to her life. She pulled out a fresh pack of 3 by 5 index cards from her brown plastic purse and began making flash cards. Anne and Sherrie attempted to learn the rules by rote.

Thankfully, Jonas came back quickly.

Grace Krabbe was our next writer when we reconvened.

Grace has blue hair which she pulls back against her scalp in a brutally savage bun. Her blue hair fascinates me. I kept checking her out, looking for any piece of her hair brave enough to not conform to her wobbly old head until she caught me at it.

Before she could talk to Jonas about me, I pantomimed to her that she had something in the corner of her mouth. She pulled out a lace handkerchief and began wiping at her face until she smeared lipstick all over the right side of

## Writers Anonymous

her face. She looked goofy. I nodded slightly to her to let her know that the mark was gone and she mouthed thank you to me. Grace turned away from me and smiled seductively at Jonas as she slipped her lace hanky into her cleavage.

It turns out Grace Crabbe's writes children's stories. "Once upon a time I wrote a story. I will share it with you if you will fold your hands in front of you and do not talk." She looked pointedly at me. "Let's slip on those listening ears."

When Gracie baby finished her fifteen-page collection---I hoped and prayed she would be reprimanded. She wasn't. Jonas thought her five word sentences were adorable.

She made so much sense.

Words were her best friend.

Familiar yet very much alive.

I remembered with a jolt all of the 29 and 37 word sentences I used to be proud of before I came to this meeting and found out about the rhyming thing.

Only two rhymes came to me at that moment.

Oh, shit, I am dead

## Writers Anonymous

With

Gracie has a blue head.

The guy on the other side of me started his crap again. I pretended not to hear him whining around about this tingling and that hurting. Still, I was going to talk to him until I thought back to what happened the last time he suckered me into talking to him. I didn't want Jonas to think I was a no-talent troublemaker and I saw Gracie's wolf ears perk up as she stared at me so it would definitely be reported to him.

Luckily there was a din of noise as the others all gushed over Gracie's scribbling and I could answer Number 7 out of the corner of my mouth, "There's alotofthatgoing around." Number 7 looked at me like he wasn't altogether convinced of my sincerity. He did look bad. I waited until he looked away and moved my chair away from him. Just a little. I didn't want to hurt his feelings, but I had enough problems with this non-rhyming, 7218-word monster. I sure didn't need a bout of flu on top of everything else.

And I had troubles. Believe me. According to Jonas' list of what it takes to be a good writer, I needed to pencil in the words 'shoot, dang it, son of a gun' in many, many places. Plus, I had to substitute 'fudge' three times. Jonas was right about my mom's reaction when her Bunk-o Club saw those words. I started scratching and erasing with a vengeance.

## Writers Anonymous

I felt someone looking at me. It was Gracie. The look she shot at me said that she knew exactly what words I would need to take out of my story. That old goat thinks she knows me so well.

Gracie baby still holds the accident she had over on Fairview Street two years ago against me.

Despite how Gracie tells the story, this is what really happened that day.

I was driving down the main drag in town when I looked over and saw Gracie in her car, waiting to come out of the side street. I motioned her from my car to come on because that is just how I am. Always trying to be a nice person.

How was I supposed to know she wanted to turn left, into the path of that silver Ram Charger? She made it clear that she blamed me for the accident. She even had the nerve to tell the officer I had done it on purpose. Old fart.

I looked over at her in time to see her wrinkled claw pointing at me as she mouthed 'Swearing' to Jonas. The joke was on her, though, because by that time, Jonas' eye couldn't focus on anything.

We hurtled headlong into the waiting pages of Barbie Bennett. Barbie is in her forties and currently unemployed because she is on probation after she

## Writers Anonymous

was convicted of indecent exposure for mooning her mother-in-law at the new shopping mall.

Barbie had written a beautiful essay on the essence of baring your soul. It brought tears to my eyes as I wondered if Barbie's soul was as wrinkled as I had heard other parts of her body were.

Jonas was moved by her work, lecturing us for twelve minutes on the importance of honesty in writing.

At last. My turn. I was nervous, sure, but I knew Jonas would swoon when he heard what I wrote. I shuffled my papers, took a deep breath and prepared to read in my best voice.

I wanted to knock off their socks with the importance of the title so I looked at each of them as I read it slowly, "Looove Inn Thее Timmee of Whooping Coughhhh".

I sure had everyone's attention. Jonas was looking at me with apprehension---not sure if the title bore a sexual connotation. Old Gracie, a smirk on her face in among all of her wrinkles---was sure it did.

From my left, that wimpy Number 7 was at it again. This time he was mumbling to himself. In a way I was glad he was because now maybe Jonas would see that I wasn't the one creating all the havoc. It was this yo-yo. I

## Writers Anonymous

couldn't even concentrate on my manuscript, thanks to Number 7 grabbing at his tie, writhing in his chair, pointing at his chest.

I finished my first paragraph despite him and his theatrics. I paused and looked over at him so he would be quiet. He looked really bad. His face was all red, sweat was pouring off him and he was going as limp as a handshake from Gracie baby.

“I think he’s having a heart attack,” Dee shrieked.

“My God he’s going to die,” came from across the table. “My uncle just died three years ago from the same thing!”

“Boil water. Grab some scissors. “

“Give him air. Does anyone have an oxygen tank?”

Grace came around the table and assumed command. She took over, ticking off orders and me.

“Call 911,” Grace ordered, pointing her old arthritic finger at me.

I jumped up to run outside where I could get cell reception, made a U-turn, picked up my manuscript. I raced past Jonas’ prone body.

Wait a minute---Jonas’ body?



## Writers Anonymous

Oh my, it was Jonas, lying face down on that cold, hard floor. My first thought was why didn't they carpet this place? His arms were outstretched like he was trying to help someone when he fell. I turned him over on his back. The mint green sleeves of his sport coat were almost touching his elbows exposing his white dress shirt with a brown shiny stain on it from beef gravy or WD-40.

What was going on? Was my Jonas having a sympathy heart attack? I knew I had to save him.

I would give him mouth-to-mouth and save his life. He'd have to love my story then. I juked down beside his poor, pitiful body and took his arm to feel for a pulse.

I felt a pulse, dammit. I couldn't bring him back to life but I could be there in his time of need.

Grace creaked down beside me. "He's just fainted. I'll take over. You go call 911 like I told you to do in the first place." Reluctantly I left his prone body and headed outside.

The phone started to ring at the exact moment that I realized what Gracie baby had told me. Jonas had fainted. My big, teddy bear of a mentor

## Writers Anonymous

had fainted at the sight of no blood. Ahhh, Jonas was so sensitive. He was a real artiste.

They actually say “911” whenever they pick up the phone. Cool.

I gave them the address where we were meeting, and spelled my name for the woman from 911. I told her they could feel free to use my name in any news releases. She had a pretty nasty mouth for someone who works around trauma all day.

“Of course this is an emergency. That’s why I called you. That, and that horrible old bat ordered me to call you. Well, any who, I am at this writing group. It’s our first meeting and I was just starting to read my manuscript, and I was plenty worried because it’s 7218 funny words and it doesn’t rhyme when the published author, Jonas Wright, maybe you know his work? Really? Well, anyways, he is teaching our group how to get published. All of a sudden he fainted and slammed to the ground. Now I don’t know if I’ll ever get to read it but it might be for the best since I still have a lot of work to do on...”

“What happened? I just TOLD you. Jonas keeled over, fell to the floor, and he’s just lying there. From stress, I think. It’s been a tough meeting for all of us.”

## Writers Anonymous

Oh, yeah, that Number 7, the guy who reads after me? He provoked it.

He's having a heart attack."