

Writer's Block

"It's Michael, not Mike," said Jon to Cindy, doing his best impression. Double dates. There was nothing Jon hated more, especially with Michael and Michelle.

"It's good to get out," said Cindy. "And with the kids gone, I need social interaction." She proceeded to massage his feet and ankles. "I don't know why going out with them bothers you so much," she said, moving on to his big toes.

Jon gritted his teeth. Once she worked through all of his toes, he caved. Cindy called Michelle to confirm. Jon could hear Michelle's nasally laugh coming over the phone from across the room as they switched to the latest gossip about their few mutual friends.

"It's all set," said Cindy, walking back to the couch to lay in Jon's lap. "Friday at La Trovita."

"Awesome," said Jon as she kissed him on the cheek.

The night of the dinner was clear and cold. Jon and Cindy hurried across the parking lot, hunching their shoulders against the wind.

"The valet is just one more way for the restaurant to skim a few dollars," said Jon, as Cindy maneuvered around the piles of snow in the lot.

"Of course, dear," she replied.

The restaurant was warmer, if only by temperature. "Did we tell you what Michael's doing now?" said Michelle, cutting her veal into bite sized pieces. Jon forced a smile, noting once again that Michelle's wide set eyes and large flaring nostrils reminded him of an alpaca. "He's going to be a professor at Sturbridge," she said, taking a tiny nibble of the meat on her fork.

"Oh, how interesting," said Cindy. Jon noticed her face getting red, flushed from the warmth of the Cabernet.

"It's just an adjunct position," said Michael, placing a forkful of salmon into his mouth. "Nothing that glamorous, just something to fill in my free time."

"Oh honey, you are too modest," said Michelle, placing her hand on his shoulder and fingering a curl of his thick, dark hair. "Of course, what should I expect, being married to such an intellectual?" She let out a small chuckle.

"I suppose I just felt the need to give something back to society. The youths of today, their minds are so malleable and starved for intellectual stimulation," said Michael, flashing a smile meant to dazzle.

"And what better place than at a second-rate community college," said Jon. "Ouch!" he yelped, his leg stinging from the stiletto that impaled it.

"So, what's your second act, Jon?" asked Michael.

Jon paused. "Second what?"

"Your second act. The next chapter on life's great journey."

Jon stared blankly at Michael, who proceeded to pour Cindy another glass. Cindy let out a small burp, excusing herself as she took a sip off the top of the full glass.

"Jon's just fine where he is," said Cindy.

"Still at that steering wheel factory?" asked Michael.

"He's in quality control," Cindy added helpfully.

"Quality control," said Michael. "That sounds like the perfect job for you. I mean, I know I would be bored to tears doing something like that, but it's great you've found your purpose in life." Michael patted his dark goatee with his napkin. "I suppose everyone needs to challenge their minds in different ways." Jon pretended to ignore the comment, rather trying to calculate his success rate in flicking a pea in Michael's glass when no one was looking.

The night continued with another bottle of Cabernet before switching to decaf coffee for dessert. Cindy poked at her slice of triple chocolate cake, having lost interest once Michelle's slice of melon came. The waiter came around to collect plates.

Jon grabbed the uneaten cake, shoveling forkfuls of warm chocolate into his mouth. When the bill came, Jon and Michael danced obligatorily around the bill, each offering and insisting before Michael finally conceded. Cindy hugged and kissed Michael and Michelle goodbye as they waited for the valet. Jon grabbed Cindy's arm and steered her toward the parking lot.

"That was nice," said Cindy, leaning the car seat back. She huffed a sigh and the air filled with a cloud of warm alcohol infused breath. "It seems like Michael's making quite a name for himself."

"Yeah," replied Jon. They finished the rest of the ride home in silence, Cindy snoring softly in the passenger seat.

When they pulled up to the dark, empty colonial, Jon helped out Cindy, steadying her as she swayed up the steps. He put her to bed, before retiring himself.

"Second act," he mumbled as he trailed off. "What a load of..."

Jon sat in his study the next morning, reading the local newspaper as he finished his toast and coffee. The edges of the newspaper had become transparent as his butter-covered fingers flipped through the pages. Across the room, the television played in the background.

"Are you a creative intellectual looking for the chance to reach the hearts and minds of the tri-county area?" Jon glanced at the screen.

"Ever feel like your creative potential has been overlooked?" said the announcer.

He folded the paper and leaned forward.

"Do you desire a chance to show your friends and family you are more than just a boring Luddite working in quality control

at the local steering wheel factory? Looking for your second act?"

Jon continued nodding at the screen.

"Then enter today, in Channel Four's Story Quest. In addition to being printed in the Tri-county Weekly Writer, the winner of this year's competition will receive a chance to work with a major publisher."

Jon cocked his head, confused.

"We mean you, Jonathan Stokes!"

He had never considered writing before. Aside from a few authors, he rarely read more than the newspaper each week, but perhaps this really could be his second act. He grabbed the golf pencil on the coffee table and jotted down the details in the corner of the newspaper. As he began writing, the pencil moved in his hand, wriggling around and slithering out. He looked down to see the pencil, transformed into a snake, the head turning and hissing.

"A short story competition, Jon? Fassssscinating," the snake said, tongue darting around. He blinked, and the snake had changed, now appearing with Michael's face. Jon threw it to the ground, leaping up from his chair. The snake grew larger, knocking over lamps and tables as it swelled to overtake the

entire room. Jon looked for an exit, but Michael's tail had blocked the door out.

"A Luddite like you? You're no writer. You'll cccccccertainly fail," he said softly, leaping forward at Jon.

The snake's mouth widened as it came forward. Jon felt the hot slime slide around his entire body as the snake consumed him.

"But what about my second act?!" shouted Jon. He sat up, his pajamas damp and cold in the exposed air.

"What, honey?" said Cindy sleepily.

"Nothing," said Jon. "Go back to sleep." Cindy closed her eyes, rolling over. A writer, thought Jon. He fell back asleep, smiling as he tried to dream about an alpaca stomping on a snake's head accidentally.

The next morning at work, Jon searched for story competitions in the area on his computer. After some time, he found the local radio station was in fact holding a small contest. Not giving the idea any more consideration, he pulled out his credit card and signed himself up. Act one, complete, he thought to himself.

Over the next two weeks, Jon worked in his study, converting the space into his own retreat. Words of inspiration covered the walls, famous author's photos were sprinkled

between. He had found a kitschy store for authors in the mall downtown.

"All the real writers still use manual typewriters," said the store clerk. Jon smiled, nodding in agreement.

"Excuse me," said a lady behind Jon indignantly. "I actually like my iMac." The clerk grinned at Jon, rolling his eyes at the lady. Jon reciprocated, pulling out his credit card to pay for the typewriter.

He replaced his worn leather cushioned chair for an ergonomic stool, his khakis and polos for hemp button downs, his cup of coffee for GMO free, additive free, conflict free herbal tea. His study, once plainly decorated, was transformed into a whimsical sanctuary. He was told all of this would guarantee success as a writer.

In two weeks, Jon had transformed himself from a first act Neanderthal in quality control, to a second act creative intellect. His life, once a stereotype of bad haircuts, cheap wristwatches and a dead end job, was now blossoming into a beautiful new beginning. Jon's metamorphosis was complete, taking every step to dive into the world of writing, except one.

"Tomorrow?" shouted Jon at the radio on the way to work, spitting out bits of plant leaf from the herbal tea in his thermos. The radio announcement continued to play, reminding everyone to submit their story for a chance to be read by thousands in the tri-county area. How could he have forgotten the deadline? How could two weeks have gone by so quickly? He parked the car haphazardly, sprinting into the building as frantic thoughts bounced around in his head. How would he meet the deadline?

The day edged along. Jon racked his brain for an idea, pushing off all his meetings to focus on the task. He scribbled ideas on a blank sheet of paper, crossing out each one in turn.

How did people do this? Jon paused to think of all the books he preferred to read. Patterson, Clancy, whoever wrote the Hardy Boys—how did these guys get their ideas? Jon took another sip from his thermos, chewing on a leaf that had sneaked through the hole.

His desk phone buzzed. The caller ID showed it was Cindy.

"Hi, dear," he said.

Jon continued to write words on his notepad, scribbling them out as Cindy talked.

"...also, Michael asked if I could stop by their place for a little bit. I might be home a little late," she said.

Jon drew a snake, crossing out the eyes.

"OK," he replied. "Have fun."

He hung up, pushing the conversation to the back of his mind. I just need one original idea, he thought.

Neither love, nor fate, nor all of creation could stop what Edward Dickenson had in store for his wife that night.

The line came to him at lunch. He didn't know from where it came. All he knew was it sure sounded like the start of the next great American masterpiece. He scribbled down the sentence on a quality report slip and shoved the paper in his pocket. He had to get home to write now. Finishing his lunch, Jon hurried to his desk and scrawled a sign saying he left early.

"How's everything going, Mr. Writer?" said Cindy, walking through the door. She had just returned home as Jon finished setting up his typewriter.

"Fine, dear," he replied. "I don't know if you saw the sign hanging on the door—"

"I know, I know," she said, waving her hand. "I'll leave you alone. Can't be interrupting the creative process, can I?"

"And please shut the door." She rolled her eyes before pulling the door firmly closed.

Jon looked at the photos taped to walls around his office. The photos were like a gallery of spectators waiting for his masterpiece to commence. He tried to channel their talent, shouting each of their names as he looked at the photos.

"Patterson, Clancy, King, action." He set the paper, pushed the carriage all the way over, and began to type.

"Neither love, nor fate, nor all of creation could stop what Edward Dickenson had in store for his wife that night."

Jon stared at the keys. What did Edward have in store for his wife that night? He glanced around the room, reading the inspirational posters. Nothing. He needed structure, guidelines to aid the creative process. He stared at his computer on the other side of the desk. Maybe there's a website to help with this sort of thing, he thought. He opened the web browser, searching for sites with writing tips. A plot outline.

Several sites recommended a plot outline. Jon decided it was worth a try. It sounded like something he remembered from his high school writing courses. He printed one of the templates and began filling it out.

The structure helped. He began typing out his story, starting with the background for Edward. Jon imagined he was an uncomplicated man, not pretentious enough to only go by Edward. He went by Ed with his friends. Jon continued typing, the story flowing from his fingers.

"He returned home to find his wife in bed with—"

Jon stared at the paper. He scrolled down, retyping the sentence, but the results were the same. He punched the letter e, each time watching the arm stall halfway. He leaned in close, staring at the arm with his glasses off. The lever arm, small and delicate, dangled—snapped from the trigger of the key.

Jon's heart raced. What was he going to do? He reread the inspirational posters around his room, trying to calm himself down. He had only tonight to finish. There was no time to have it repaired. His eyes rested on the computer, once again.

All the greats have to use this soulless device at some point, he figured. He grabbed the pages already written and began retyping them.

"You want me to bring you a sandwich?" asked Cindy, peeking through the door. Jon crouched over the screen, hiding the words from being seen.

"I'm good," he said shortly, "just some peace and quiet."

"Well, OK," said Cindy, retreating meekly. Jon relaxed back from the screen, saying his chant again to refocus.

Perhaps now was a good time to check his progress. The competition had required all pieces to be a minimum of two thousand words and no more than ten thousand. He had not even thought to take a break and count. He hoped he was not over the limit yet.

He pulled down the tab, hitting the word count button.

Three hundred sixty-two? It felt like so much more. He looked at the clock. Three hours in and he had written less than four hundred words. He glanced at his template. According to the personified cartoon pencil in the corner, he was nearly halfway through. Jon's heart began to race again. What could he do?

He stared at the photos of authors around the room. Each of their faces had morphed, now showing disdain. Who was he to think he could be a writer? Jon looked at the picture of Poe he had copied from the internet. What was so unique about these people?

He opened the browser on his computer, and went to a wiki page for famous authors, scanning for a unifying theme.

Cheever, Williams, Parker, Poe—all the greats had a common

trait. All of them were alcoholics. Alcohol. That was the answer.

He crept out of the room, trying not to make the door creak as he opened it. He tiptoed down the stairs, past the living room where his wife had fallen asleep watching the news. In the kitchen, Jon opened the cabinet next to the fridge. The top shelf was full of dusty half-drunk bottles of various liquors. He grabbed them all, making his way back to the room.

"To the next great American masterpiece," he said taking a swig of each. He wasn't sure which alcohol was better for writing, so he tried them all. Each one burned as he swallowed.

By the time he made it to the grocery store brand gin, he could no longer feel his tongue. He opened the word processor file and began typing again. Edward Dickenson's story came alive once more.

He had finished his introduction and began setting up the conflict. His antagonist was a suave middle aged man, a professor at a local university, a friend of the family as well.

That was going to be the twist his story. Nobody ever expects the friend to be the antagonist. Jon continued to type, his body feeling warm from the alcohol. Every time he felt like he

was stalling, he would take another sip, alternating between bottles.

A knock sounded on the door. "Come in," said Jon, stuffing the bottles below the desk as Cindy entered.

"I'm going to bed," she yawned, coming over to kiss him on the head. She sniffed his face as she leaned down. "Have you been drinking?"

"Wha? Whywood you sshlay that," he slurred.

Cindy shook her head, smiling at him. "Don't stay up too late." She closed the door on her way to the bedroom.

Jon stared at his work in front of him. He was almost to the twist, less than four pages to go by his calculation.

Edward, having discovered it was his friend having the affair with his wife, would exact revenge, but how? He looked at the clock. It was nearly midnight. Though, the deadline was less than twelve hours away. Perhaps now was a good time for a break.

He opened his browser going to his social media page.

Cindy had insisted he make an account so she could link them as married. He rarely used it at first, not caring for all the political rants. Most of the time, he used it to look at other people's photos, trying to get a glimpse into their lives.

He searched through the photos Cindy had posted. An alert at the bottom showed she had been added to a new photo album.

Jon clicked the link and the window opened to a gallery. It was from a friend's recent birthday party. Jon clicked through the photos, taking sips from the bottle of whisky to keep his inebriated state going. He continued to click, until he came across a photo of Michael and Cindy at the party. He had forgotten Michael and Michelle were there as well. He scanned the photo, looking at Michael's smug smile, his arm around Cindy in the photo. Where had he been at this time? Probably camped out in the bathroom checking updates on the baseball game. The bathroom was good for at least ten minutes of solitude. Jon studied Michael's arm. His hand was not visible but Jon guessed where it lay. He took another sip from the bottle before capping the top. He knew what Edward would do.

Jon wrote into the night, taking sips after each paragraph written. His vision began to blur, and his hands began to react more slowly to his thoughts, causing him to rewrite the same sentence over and over again until he decided to omit it entirely. He looked at the clock. It was four in the morning.

He had just one more scene to go, the resolution to his masterpiece. Standing up to stretch, he stumbled from his

chair, falling to the floor. The shag carpet was soft and warm from the heat register that blasted hot air three feet away. He closed his eyes, deciding now would be a good time for a quick nap, a refresh before finishing. He burped from the acid reflux causing the cheap liquor to come back up. As the reflux faded, he fell asleep.

The light was intense. His mouth tasted sour. Jon tried to wet his tongue, but it stuck to the roof of his mouth as he moved it. The headache, tearing through his skull, caused him to run to the bathroom where, like a hungry newborn, he began to suck on the faucet, the cold water revitalizing him. This is why artists die so young, he figured. Who can live like this?

"Honey," Cindy called from downstairs. "Do you want breakfast?"

Jon wiped his eyes, and looked at the clock. It was two hours to go, and he had yet to review his draft, much less the last scene. Hitting the print button, he sent his unfinished piece to the printer and grabbed the copy to take downstairs with him.

"Is that it?" asked Cindy. "Can I read it?" Jon clenched the paper tightly, having to will himself to place them on top of the counter. Cindy reached for them, reading as she sat at

the table. Jon sat there, drinking from his coffee cup, finally remembering how good caffeine tasted.

Her expressions were unreadable. Her face was untelling. He pretended not to watch, keeping a slanted eye on her as he finished his cup.

"So," she said, taking a seat next to him, "is there something on your mind?"

Jon remained silent, looking down at his now empty cup. Her warm hands embraced his, folding into his like interlocking puzzle pieces.

"I was thinking," she said, her eyes looking into his, "maybe we could go out for dinner tonight. To celebrate your new masterpiece. Just the two of us."

He felt a strange tingling. Perhaps it was the caffeine coursing through his veins for the first time in a while. Perhaps it was something else.

"Excuse me," he said, pulling away his seat, "I'll be right back." He went upstairs and sat back down at the computer, his work staring back at him, waiting for resolution. The clock joined in, showing an hour until the deadline. With a smile on his face, he turned off the computer and headed back downstairs.