

Redemption at Jefferson High

Eddie scowled at the invisible magnet stuck to the delete key. Each time his fingers would start to type the next literary classic, his lag bolt of a pinkie would veer out of formation and strike the menacing square. An hour of work, and the only thing on the screen was his reflection.

Professor Wilder had said that writing was like a river. Never reaching its destination as the crow flew, it took its time, sometimes with a roar, sometimes a trickle. Allow it to meander, she'd said. Let it flow. Sure, you might get caught in an occasional eddy. You might even get stuck behind a log jam, aka writer's block. It was temporary. Eventually, the river would break through or go around. Eddie wasn't so sure. Afterall, the Colorado River had been shackled by Hoover Dam for nearly a century.

He didn't have a century. It was ten o'clock at night and his outline was due tomorrow. Maybe a break would help. He stepped outside his dorm room and wandered down the hall. When he returned, he checked his text messages. Then his Instagram account. Then he played video games. Then he did his laundry.

Eddie slumped in his chair. An Engineering major, he told his parents he took Intro to Creative Writing as an easy elective so he could devote more time to his harder classes. In truth, he did it so that he could devote more time to partying. But now, it was almost midnight, and his brain was fried from thinking instead of drinking.

Screw this. He clapped his laptop closed, yanked the switch to his reading lamp, and flopped onto his bed. He didn't want to be awake when Chet stumbled in and rambled on about the epic night Eddie had missed. It was early enough in the semester that he could drop the writing

class. He'd cancel it and sign up for Jazz in America. Relieved that he'd willed his assignment from existence, he closed his eyes.

Sleep came in fits. The late-night energy drink may have been the culprit, or perhaps the unconscious brain refused to accept the terms of surrender sanctioned by the conscious brain. A flicker of thought lit a space in his mind like the afterimage of his reading lamp. Vague, shadow cloaked ideas floated on the fringe of the psyche. His teacher's voice echoed. *Draw ideas from your own experience. Transform your passion and emotion into words.* The flame intensified and thoughts took shape.

He sprung out of bed. It was nearly two o'clock in the morning. Chet must've crashed at Jill's place, so Eddie had the room to himself. Draw from his own experience. He could do that. He pried the laptop open and typed. His fingers and brain achieved Rolex synchronization; no disgruntled saboteur this time. Ideas surged like a tsunami. They didn't pussyfoot around the logjam; they blasted through it, shattering and splintering the tangled obstruction. His fingers banished the delete key, refusing to acknowledge its presence even as an ally against the common typo. They dutifully transcribed his thoughts, molded them into a cohesive roadmap for his story.

A screech startled him out of his writing binge. The alarm clock. He'd pulled an all-nighter; not the first. The flurry of finger strokes subsided, and he struck the last key – save. He'd finished the outline. Professor Wilder would be blown away.

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On a scale of one-to-being suspended on a flagpole by his wedged tighty whities, Blaine pegged his experience at a five. Back in Wichita, he was considered one of the cool kids, but those pages had been written and turned, the dog-eared folds faded. Now he was the new kid in a new town at a new high school.

The standard bully clichés had been toppled. Tall and handsome with thick wavy hair, Blaine lacked pimples, obesity, and a clarinet case plastered with Star Trek stickers. The other kid, Jack, was neither a jock nor physically imposing, but damn was he a marksman with words. Blaine considered himself Jack's equal in this department, but with nobody to laugh at his clever jokes, he always ended up shooting blanks when he returned fire.

Blaine was removing his algebra book from his locker when Jack and one of his cronies approached. Sporting similar haircuts and polo shirts, they had the look of guys who wooed their neighbors with platitudes of sir and ma'am before deflowering their daughters at prom.

Jack stopped in front of Blaine and telegraphed the verbal strike with a shit-eating grin.

"What's up, *Stain*?"

On cue, Jack's friend erupted in laughter.

"Good one," Blaine said. "That's funny because it rhymes with my name." Then he turned to Jack's friend. "Is it my imagination or did someone with the unfortunate name of *Jack* just start a name war with me?"

The other boy crinkled his brow in confusion, but Jack got it. "Good point, *Stain*. You're clever. That's what I like about you."

"I wasn't aware you liked me," Blaine said.

"I don't. I just like that you have a big mouth. Maybe I'll plant my fist in it."

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"I wouldn't recommend it," Blaine said. "Poor soil conditions. Nothing would grow."

"What a douche," Jack's friend said. "C'mon let's head. I can't be late to third hour or dickwad will give me another detention."

Jack nodded and then turned to Blaine. "Later, Stain." He paused a moment as if a thought struck. "*Shit Stain.*"

The boys roared at that one, high fived, and marched off to their next class.

Blaine had weathered the incident, but by the end of the day, a rumor had circulated that he had shit his pants in class; hence his new nickname, *Shit Stain Blaine*.

During the walk home he absently kicked a rock along a sidewalk that fronted a few run-down shops. His shoulders slumped and his hands found the depths of his pockets. Why had he been targeted? Why was anyone targeted? There seemed to be a natural pecking order and kids like Jack did the pecking.

"Hey, boy."

The voice startled him. He turned to see a woman hunched against a store front under a neon sign that read *hecks Cashed*. She shared a blanket with a chihuahua.

"Hey," Blaine said. No point in ignoring her or running away. No threat here.

"You got a few dollars?" she said. A rash crept under the wisps of hair along her scalp like an army of fire ants through dead grass.

Blaine opened his wallet, withdrew a five, and handed it to her. Tomorrow's lunch money.

"God bless," she said. "Mabel's gonna eat good tonight."

Blaine didn't know if Mabel was the woman or the dog – hopefully the woman – but he was glad to help. When he got home, he retreated to his bedroom. It had been a shitty day, no pun

intended. He tried to summon an answer to his own problem, but his thoughts settled on the interaction at the storefront. Life, the ultimate bully, had selected Mabel as its victim. She hadn't always been that way. She was someone's daughter, probably a high school student at one time. How did she end up on that sidewalk? Blaine rubbed his eyes. Were the tears for himself or the homeless woman? He didn't know.

Eddie's all-nighter had paid off – sort of. He received full credit on the assignment, but so did everyone else. Five points for participation. The handwritten comments from his teacher read like a back-handed compliment. *Nice job. Don't be afraid to stray from the path as your characters reveal themselves.*

Why would he need to stray from the path? The path was good.

Class had just ended, and the other students were shuffling out. The teacher was hunched at the podium while placing her lecture notes into her briefcase.

Eddie approached. "Excuse me, professor. Do you have a minute?"

Professor Wilder unfolded her thin frame. Her smooth skin seemed to clash with her grey curls making her resemble a child wearing a wig. "Sure, what's up?"

Eddie handed her the outline. "I didn't understand your comments."

She scanned the page. "Oh? Which part?"

"Everything after *nice job*," Eddie said.

A gurgle escaped her mouth. Eddie wasn't sure if it was a laugh or a sigh. She motioned to a table and they sat.

"I'm sorry, I have lots of students. You are?"

"Eddie."

"Right. Your outline's just a tool, Eddie. Don't let it stifle you. Ignore it if it suits you." Her glasses were perched on the tip of her nose, and she peeked over them as if they too were a tool to be ignored.

"Do you think I need to stray?" Eddie said. "Ignore the outline, I mean?"

"Maybe. Maybe not. It has potential. A bit heavy handed. Not every story has to shock the reader. That part will be up to your characters. Let *them* decide how it plays out."

"That sounds like a cryptic English teacher thing – no offense," Eddie said. "*I'm* the one writing the story. The characters aren't real."

"Aren't they?" she said.

Eddie frowned. She seemed to be playing the part of the eccentric philosopher saying weird things to inspire thought. It wasn't working. "The characters are just a figment of my imagination."

"Your characters are as real as you allow them to be," she said. "They may even surprise you."

That seemed to be all he would get from her. "I'll keep that in mind," he said. He rose from the chair.

"Eddie, check with me again after you've written a couple chapters. There's a certain magic to writing you have to experience firsthand to appreciate."

The knock at Blaine's bedroom door chased the tears from his eyes. No respectable high schooler would let his father see him cry. Especially *his* father.

He pressed pause on the game controller and wiped his face with the back of his hand.

"Come in."

A ray of light spilled into the room but was quickly eclipsed by the figure that filled the doorway.

"Hey dad."

"Hey buddy, how was school today?" If his father's physical presence failed to intimidate, the baritone growl finished the job.

"Fine."

"Did you – Hey, you're not smoking weed are you?" He peered into Blaine's eyes.

"Yeah dad, I'm smoking some killer ganja. Want a hit?"

His father inched closer until their eyeballs were almost touching.

Blaine playfully shoved him. "Personal space, man. I'm not smoking weed. I just got something in my eye."

"Very funny," his father said. "You get your math test back yet?"

"You mean my quiz? Yeah, I got an A".

"Right on!" he said. "Nice work."

"Thanks."

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"Those boys still giving you a hard time?"

Blaine shrugged. "Kind of. Nothing I can't handle." And no point getting his father riled up or he'd start talking about the panacea to everything. Sports.

"Man, I wish I was there. I'd grab their skinny-ass necks and – "

"And you'd go to jail for assaulting a minor."

"It might be worth it," his father said. "I can't just sit around and do nothing while my kid gets picked on. What about that fighting class we talked about?"

"It's not like that. It's mostly just talk."

"You could make it more than talk. Kick their asses and shut them up."

"Sure," Blaine said. "They call me a name, I knock them out, and I get suspended."

"There's always sports."

Blaine turned so his father wouldn't see him roll his eyes.

"Don't roll your eyes, son. I mean it. When I was in school, the athletes never got picked on."

Here we go again. Playing sports for Blaine meant riding the pine. Bench warmers weren't knocking it out of the park on the field or in the popularity contest. "Why does there have to be a pecking order? Someone always seems to be at the bottom." He had intended the question to reference himself, but he couldn't help thinking of Mabel, the homeless woman.

His father shrugged. "I don't know. Just seems to be the way it is."

"Did you ever pick on anyone?" Blaine could've asked if his father was on the *receiving* end of the bullying, but the thought was laughable.

"The kids I hung out with weren't always nice to the brainy kids," his father said.

"Why? How come you weren't nice to them?"

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His father sat on his bed and sighed. "I don't know. I was probably insecure about something or looking for attention. I've grown up a lot since then."

"Maybe this is payback," Blaine said.

His father quieted and seemed to study the floor. "Maybe."

Silence filled the room. His father seemed to be out of ideas.

Blaine had tried to provoke him with the payback comment implying that his father's actions as a teenager somehow came back to haunt him. Seeing his father sitting there looking so deflated, Blaine regretted it. A thought struck and he decided to try a different tactic. "Dad, do you believe in free will?"

"Hmm? That's a strange question."

"It's just that – well, you said you don't even know why you teased other kids. Maybe it was beyond your control, and you were just meant to be a bully."

"Sounds like a cop out," his father said. "If I was a dick, I should own up to it. Where are you getting this from anyway?"

"Philosophy class," Blaine said.

Now it was his father's turn to roll his eyes.

"I'm serious," Blaine said. "There's a popular belief that everything we do is part of some predetermined plan. If God is all-knowing then he already knows what we're going to do before we do it. If that's the case, then we don't really have free will."

"What if I change my mind about something?" his father asked. "Have steak for dinner instead of chicken?"

"Then it was always determined that you were going to have steak even though you thought you were going to have chicken."

"Maybe," his father said. "Interesting thought. Like the story's already been written and we're just going through the motions."

"Exactly," Blaine said. "That's the thought, anyway."

They continued the discussion over dinner – steak – and Blaine felt better afterwards.

The river was surging now. Class five rapids. Eddie's story was a raft and each strike of the key a command: paddle forward, left back, high side, paddle forward. He guided the story effortlessly through the first two chapters following his outline like a map. Every word leapt onto the screen unencumbered by the thesaurus. Every simile was as clever as a catfish stealing a worm from a three-pronged hook.

The words continued to flow. He let the tension build, teasing his audience and foreshadowing the event that would cause every reader to lose his shit.

He'd been at it for hours. His stomach begged for ingestion and his bowels pleaded for expulsion. He ignored them both. Like a spoiled child, his phone cried for attention, its vibrations and ringtones conspiring to derail his progress. The text message from Chet earned no more than a sideways glance. *Dude, where are you? This party's off the hook!*

"Off the hook," Eddie said. "Good idea." He clicked his phone off completely, something he hadn't done in months. Was he really writing a story instead of going out with his friends?

The raft that was a story approached a critical point, a waterfall. His protagonist had to endure three more sentences of plot and then boom! Eddie was already thinking four, five, six sentences later. As the story's creator, he was omniscient, all powerful and all knowing.

The raft teetered on the edge of the waterfall, its bow kissing the misty air.

Then something happened. Somewhere in Eddie's brain, a synapse fired and gave an instruction to his fingers. They rejected it. The directive didn't make sense. As his typing ground to a halt, the waterfall froze and trapped the raft at the top. Eddie stared at the screen in disbelief, his fingers still twitching from the muscle memory of the key strikes.

The next day, Eddie had tried to corner his teacher at the podium after class, but she'd silenced him with a wave of her hand and instructed him to schedule a meeting during her office hours later in the week.

Three days later, he sat facing her. A sea of clutter separated them as if they were two peninsulas. There must be a desk under there somewhere. The array of papers, books, trinkets, and fast food wrappers couldn't be suspended in mid-air. A corkboard on the wall was similarly fashioned. Each paper was secured by a single pushpin, never centered, so the sheets hung at haphazard angles, not one parallel to another.

"Nice office," Eddie said. "Looks like my dorm room."

"Well, then you have the makings of a fine writer," his teacher said. "Messy workstations are the sign of a right-brained person. That's where creativity comes from, you know."

"I'll try that one on my roommate," Eddie said.

She smiled. "How's the story coming along?"

“Good. I like what I’ve written so far.”

“I’m looking forward to reading it,’ she said. “What brings you in today?”

Eddie had shelved the story for a few days, but it had been on his mind a lot. “Remember when you said to let the characters decide what happens in the story, and that they may surprise me?”

“Sure.”

“What did you mean?”

She made the laugh/sigh noise again. Did she think something was funny or was she annoyed? He still didn’t know.

“Think of it this way,” she said. “If you’ve developed your characters, then each will have a unique voice and personality. How they behave will be determined by who they are - their upbringing, their values, their mood.”

Eddie nodded.

“Humans are in-the-moment creatures. Today, I had planned to do three things: grade papers, eat Paleo, and tidy up my office. You can see how the third one went.”

“And the second one.” Eddie pointed to a Taco Bell wrapper.

“Zero for three,” she said. “In other words, humans don’t follow the outlines we create for ourselves. Neither should our characters unless we want them to be boring and predictable.”

“Then why do an outline?”

“Why, indeed?” she answered.

Then why did you assign the stupid outline? Eddie thought. He kept his mouth shut. He was starting to understand. “Do you think our characters have free will even though we created them?”

“Most definitely,” she answered. “Did one of your characters surprise you?”

“Yep.”

“Thought so,” she said. “Want my advice? Embrace it. Your character knows more about himself than you do. If he does something different from what you expected, he did it for a reason.”

Maybe the oddball English teacher was on to something.

“Thanks, professor. I think I get it.” When Eddie left her office, he was already writing the next sentences in his mind.

Sticks and stones had nothing on the invisible projectiles that crushed morale and obliterated self-esteem. For the last two months, Blaine had endured every form of psychological warfare. What had started as a once-a-day event, now pervaded every waking moment. Before, during, and after class, Jack's taunts tortured him. Blaine had tried everything to no avail. Whenever Jack emerged, it would trigger an uncontrollable physical and emotional response like Pavlov's dogs. Even breathing seemed to shut down. *Inhale, exhale, good job, careful not to hyperventilate. Don't make an ass out of yourself by passing out.*

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Blaine had nearly reached a breaking point the previous week and had faked sick for three days so he could stay home. Having missed the lectures, he'd fallen behind in his two hardest classes. His few friendships had deteriorated. Anyone hanging out with a leper was sure to contract the ugly disease. Had he pushed them away or had they bolted out of self-preservation? He'd also blown up at his father. How the hell could a former bully understand what he was going through? Why did his mother have to die? He needed her.

What he didn't need was Jack's shit, but it would come soon, as the transition between third and fourth period had arrived. As he spun the combination lock to his locker, a voice shattered the ambient noise of ten different conversations within earshot.

"Oh, God. What is that stench?"

Blaine knew there could be only one possible origination for the imaginary smell that had infiltrated Jack's sensitive nostrils.

As Jack came closer, he sniffed everything and everyone in sight. Nasal whistles and snorts were exaggerated to ridiculousness. "It's not the bench. Not you, Anne. Nope, nothing under here."

Most of the students in the breezeway laughed. A few, like Blaine, were not amused. They knew what was coming.

"I think I'm getting warmer. Warmer. Warmer. Goddamn! Shit Stain is that you? Did you shit your pants again?"

Some students frowned or mumbled under their breath that Jack was an asshole. Not many laughed, but laughs are louder than facial expressions and mumbles, so to Blaine's ears, the whole school was howling.

Blaine loaded a response from his arsenal. *I smell it too, Jack <sniff> <sniff>. I think it's your breath. Have you been eating shit sandwiches again?* He wanted to say it, but he froze. He wanted to fight back, but the relentless barrage over the last several months had snuffed his ability to mount a counterattack. He just stood there.

Jack kept going, but some instinctual defense mechanism triggered deep within Blaine's psyche and filtered most of it out. He caught something about a diaper, but the rest had escaped him.

That night, Blaine's room was dark, but his mind descended to a much darker place.

The next morning, he got dressed, ate his oatmeal, stowed his books in his backpack, and shoved his father's pistol in the waistband of his cargo pants.

There were two ways to stop the torment; the only difference between the two was who would be in front of the bullet when it exploded from the chamber. Since he'd survived the night, his choice had been made.

Blaine spotted Jack at the end of the hallway and walked toward him. Anger smoldered in his gut like a heap of burning coal. He summoned the memories, re-lived the pain, fueled the coals like a blacksmith's bellows. A sense of detachment washed over him as he closed the distance.

Jack looked up. The corners of his mouth pulled into the beginning of a grin. It faltered when he met Blaine's eyes.

Blaine's fingers gripped the handle of the weapon still concealed under the folds of his untucked shirt. Strength and power radiated from the gun and surged through his veins.

The meeting with Professor Wilder had invigorated Eddie. She'd said to let the characters decide their fate. He opened his laptop and scrolled to the last sentence he'd written. He read it again.

Blaine's fingers gripped the handle of the weapon still concealed under the folds of his untucked shirt. Strength and power radiated from the gun and surged through his veins.

Eddie thought about it as he perused his outline. The pages chronicled the events of a school shooting. Could the constant torment have led his character to pull the trigger? He thought so. There were times in Eddie's childhood when he could almost envision *himself* pulling the trigger. Blaine, on the other hand, fiercely opposed it. Convinced that his character had free will, Eddie wrote the next sentences.

Suddenly, Blaine let go. He released the gun and the anger that went along with it. The gun represented weakness not strength. He thought of his father. The man had done his best to raise a son on his own; Blaine would not dishonor his name. He thought of Jack. If Blaine took the boy's life, he would rob him of the chance to change as his father had. He thought of Mabel. The woman had confronted far worse than Blaine had. People like her needed help from people like Blaine. He wouldn't be of any use to them in prison.

He found himself facing Jack. The gun was still hidden under his clothes. His breathing was as steady as a sniper's trigger finger.

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"You okay, Shit Stain?" Jack said. The comment lacked its usual bite. He seemed to be unsure of himself.

Blaine was okay. A mischievous grin spread across his face and a twinkle lit his eyes. "Never better, Jack-off."

Blaine's smile must've been contagious; Eddie had been infected. He had experienced the magic of writing. If engineering followed straight lines and precision, writing embraced the blurred and the vague. Sure, you could build a bridge across the river, but why not surrender to its current and emerge somewhere unexpected?

Eddie looked at his outline, selected all text after chapter three, and struck the delete key. Who needs an outline anyway?

The last thing he did was to delete the title: *Tragedy at Jefferson High*. Maybe Blaine could help him come up with a new one.