

## I'D HATE FOR THIS TO GET OUT

I'd hate for this to get out, but I worry that my writing has turned bulimic. A year ago, I published a 253-word story, which was well-received, yet I pounded my head against the wall, literally smacked my forehead, because I couldn't shave three measly words to make it an even 250. And it has gotten worse. I used to devour my writing, but now I think it's consuming me.

Once upon a time, I made a name for myself in the world of short stories. I worked without limits in those days, writing everything from cultured to kitschy. If I needed five thousand words to tell a story, then I was done at five thousand words. I could go three thousand, however, or seven, or ten, whatever it took. The freedom was invigorating at first, but then I needed more of a challenge. So I experimented, becoming an easy mark for the newest literary vogue. Short-shorts they called them. Tell a complete story, with rich characters and a layered plot, in fewer than two thousand words.

Although my first attempts were disastrous, it seemed like harmless fun. I treated this writing like a race to the finish line, the clock always running, hurry, hurry. I cut corners with the plot, relied on clichés. The prose became choppy and sparse. A jumbled mess. The challenge was in finding ways to make these messes full and complete without raising the word count. The process felt healthy, though, because it forced me to examine every word, every choice. As my stories continued to shrink, they got better, and I raised the bar with each new piece. Fifteen hundred words, max. Then a thousand. Once I got the knack of it, short-short anthologies traded on my reputation as a short story writer because I, Jack McPherson, had become one of them.

The stories poured out, so when the trend turned to flash fiction – word counts in the

hundreds instead of the thousands – I was ready. Publishing a story at just over five hundred words was a breakthrough for me. I was jonesing on it, the rush of extreme fiction, all the time yearning for less and less. It gets inside you, like when you're sitting at a slot machine in Vegas telling yourself you'll play just ten more minutes, until next thing you know the sun is coming up.

Winning the One Hundred Word contest sponsored by the Boise Arts Council's made me a madman. What had started as a novelty was becoming an addiction, to make each story shorter than the one before. I'm not talking about fifty-eight words of babbling incoherency, designed for nothing more than to get the word count down. I'm not talking about poetry. It had to be a whole story. Conflict. Crisis. Resolution. Three-dimensional characters and writing that resonated. As if that wasn't challenging enough, I had to do this while my agent hassled me to go back to my old ways. "Why don't you write real stories anymore?" he'd say. "You're good at it, you know."

"Real" stories, he called them. He just didn't get it.

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There's something about Fifth Avenue that feels like the center of the universe, so I didn't mind Ed calling me in to chat. "Jack," he said, "we need to talk about this latest piece you sent me."

He had been grumbling about not knowing how to sell whatever it was I was writing, but I knew he had my best interest at heart, so I tried to work with him, convince him that at forty-four years old, I was feeling like an artist for the first time in my life. But I also I had to hold my ground. "I don't care what that guy from *The New Yorker* thinks," I said, "the cowboy

was smoking a Newport.”

“That’s not the piece I’m talking about.”

“Oh,” I said, taking a seat in front of his desk. “You mean my ‘ultimate short story.’”

“You wrote twenty-one words.”

“Yeah, but that includes the title. The story itself is only fifteen.”

Ed turned to his computer screen and read it out loud. “‘Why I Feel Like a Boarder,’ by Jack McPherson: ‘She’s not pushy or greedy or vulgar. Obstinate, maybe. I live with an obstinate woman.’” He smirked and asked, “What exactly do I do with this?”

“Nothing. I’d like you to just delete it.”

“Just chuck it?”

“Yeah. I was naive when I wrote that. I’ve already come up with a better one, a shorter one. Just eight words.”

“You wrote an eight-word story?”

“I call it ‘Retina Burn.’ I’ve memorized the whole thing, if you’d like to hear.”

He smiled and shook his head. “By all means.”

I knew I had to sell it, so I gave one of my best dramatic readings, slow and with passion.

“Retina Burn: I choose the sun over their anguished faces.”

“The retina – it blinds you if you look at the sun. Is that it?” Ed asked.

“People make choices.”

“So your protagonist chooses to go blind instead of facing his loved ones. That’s rather trite, don’t you think? A little overly clever?”

“It’s all there. Drama. Emotion. Powerful stuff that stays with you. But this is just the

start. I have a vision for the shortest stories ever written. One word each.”

“You’re gimmicking, Jack. Half the students to flush through an MFA program have tried something like that. Why so desperate? Just get back to writing.”

I shifted to the edge of my chair. I get that way when I’m talking about work. “I’m envisioning a collection, a serious collection. Say, ten linked stories.”

“Of one word each? I can’t sell a ten-word book, Jack.”

“It’s a lot more than ten words, Ed. Give me some credit. The table of contents alone would be twice that.” Ed smirked again and nodded. I knew that I had him. I’ve worked with Ed Tavish for twelve years, and that smirk he gives is about as good as it gets. I’d hate for this to get out, but when I’m feeling a little blue, I’ll go to one of those Internet booksellers and type in my name. Three collections of short stories pop up. All still in print. Looking at a page that’s all about me, that’s as instant as gratification gets. The only thing better is Ed’s smirk.

“The first couple stories would be longer,” I said. “Like that eight-word gem I just gave you.”

“The ‘Retina’ epic.”

“Exactly. Then maybe I follow that up with a couple three-word stories. Those are the key. They set the context for the rest of the collection. It’s all about context.”

“And you can establish context in three words?”

“The second story carries with it the context of the first. What if a guy comes in and sets your desk on fire.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“I’m giving you a for-instance. Let’s say a guy comes in and burns down your desk.”

“A-guy-comes-in-and-burns-down-your-desk. That’s nine words.”

“But with context, I can tell that story in one word. The readers already know from the last story that you were arguing. There’s the conflict. They know the other guy has matches. There’s the crisis. So I write, ‘Whoosh!’ One word, and the desk is up in flames. Resolution.”

“I can’t believe I’m saying this, but that almost makes sense. In a slightly warped sort of way.”

“Next story. One word: ‘Handcuffs.’ A story about an arsonist who sets a desk on fire. He gets nabbed by the authorities, who haul him away to the hoosegow. Plenty of implied drama.”

“How about ‘Handcuffed.’ Puts more action into the piece.”

“Brilliant. So you’re with me?”

“I wouldn’t want you to presume that, but I see your point. I’m worried about you, though.”

“You’re a good man.”

“So are you, Jack. But you still worry me.”

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Ed offered to buy me lunch, but I had to get home to write something that would show him I’m okay. I was beginning to fret over the way Ed fretted over me, as if I didn’t already have enough to worry about. I decided to give him something new that would help him relax, a meaty story with thousands and thousands of words.

I stopped for Chinese takeout, but I didn’t touch the food. I was too wound up to eat. I sat at my keyboard and started the writing process like I always do, looking at my collection of autographed baseballs that I keep on the bookshelf next to my desk for inspiration. The routine

is, I grab one at random and think about whoever signed it, drifting back to his playing days, and my mind wanders. Next thing I know, I have a story idea. Some writers have muses, I have baseball players.

This time, I grabbed Reggie Jackson from the shelf and I thought about those three home runs he hit in that World Series game. Serendipity led me to Fred Stanley, a utility infielder with the Yankees in the '70s and '80s. I knew from a Topps baseball card I had as a kid that Fred Stanley grew up in Farnhamville, Iowa, which is in the same county where my ex-wife was born. She never appreciated the coincidence. She never appreciated anything about baseball players, for that matter. Maybe I was punishing her for not caring about her Fred Stanley connection, but I kept a secret from her the entire six years of our marriage. So I thought maybe I'd write about that, because confessionals can go on for pages. I plopped down at my keyboard and started typing:

#### The Tutor

Shortly after we moved to New York City, I started disappearing for one afternoon a week, never telling my wife where I was, which was at an impoverished school on the other side of town, listening to struggling students read. The third grade teacher was a knockout, but I believed my motives were genuine, except that it bothered my wife that she didn't know where I was. So I didn't tell her for just that reason.

Those third grade kids had interesting stories, too, some that could really tug at your heart.

I stopped writing when I realized this would be about busted relationships, because who wants

to linger when you're writing about your ex-wife? Either that or I was bragging about helping unfortunate children, which felt a little too self-indulgent. I don't want anyone to get the wrong impression, that I'm proclaiming myself to be some sort of saint, so in the interest of full disclosure, I looked instead for a blemish to write about, like how I was arrested last month. Spent a night in jail. All over a stupid traffic ticket. I haven't confessed this to anyone, so I'd hate for this to get out, but I am, after all, writing fiction. I'm assuming I'll get the benefit of the doubt. I cleared a new screen and wrote "Green Means Go." The details of my arrest poured out, page after page, and I could tell I was really onto something, something sure to please Ed Tavish. But that was before I was distracted by the sun.

At high noon, the sun was directly overhead, exactly where it was supposed to be in the sky. I knew this because I had checked my watch when I got home from my meeting with Ed. A little after two, however, I noticed that the sun appeared to be moving toward me instead of away from me. I shook it off as an illusion caused by the stress of writing, but by three o'clock, there was no denying it. I craned my neck up to the window of my sixth-floor apartment. The sun was once again directly overhead.

Weird, I thought, but the confessional was pouring out of me and I didn't want to stop. By four o'clock, I had the entire story sketched out. It would be twenty pages, easy. At least six thousand words, something Ed could bite into. But now the sun had continued past me, eastward, into the morning sky. I thought, it must be me. I had become disoriented, my watch was running fast. In reality it *was* late morning, and the sun was where it belonged. When I looked at my computer screen, however, I saw nearly a full day's work, more than eight pages already of "Green Means Go." My Chinese food still sat on the kitchen table, the bags soggy and

rank. And the sun still drifted eastward. I couldn't stand it any longer. I called 9-1-1.

"You must be getting a lot of calls," I said.

"About what, sir?"

"The sun."

"You'll have to be more specific."

"The sun . . . going the wrong way."

"Sir? Are you all right?"

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I printed out all that I had written that day and started reading, but I couldn't get past the first three pages before I reflexively reached for my pen and started cutting. I went after the adverbs first, and then the prepositional phrases. Just punching it up, I told myself. Basic copyediting. But I couldn't stop. Before I knew it, I was deleting entire sentences, and then entire paragraphs. When I was done, my confessional was down to seven sentences:

#### Green Means Go

"But the light was green," I told the cop as he approached my window.

He didn't deny it, but he still wrote me out a ticket. "You didn't wait for oncoming traffic from the turn lane to clear the intersection," he said.

"But the light was green!"

Okay, so I shouldn't have added, "you fucking idiot!" And I certainly shouldn't have opened the door and lunged at the cop, especially while still wearing my seat belt. But still, I have to be the only driver in America who's gotten a ticket for running a green light.



It still felt way too long. I knew what I had to do. This wasn't the time to worry about the sun because I needed to write two versions of this new story. The original, the gluttonous feast of prose and plot, would be something Ed could gorge on. Then I'd finish the real one, the short one, the one that would keep me lean. I needed this balanced diet, without any excess, to keep me sane.

But there was nothing balanced about this diet. It was more like bread and water. With the last of the evening light fading, I thought about calling Ed, to see what he made of the wayward sun. But what if I was imagining the whole thing? The six o'clock news made no mention of an unexplained phenomenon, no signs of the apocalypse. Nothing on the Internet, either. So I immersed myself in writing and worked into the night on the two versions, making one as long as I could, the other as short as possible. I wrote all night, writing and purging, writing and purging. Then I printed the stories out and ripped both versions to shreds, because the only thing that mattered was seeing which way the sun would rise in an hour.

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No surprises there. The sun came up in the east, just like always, and the morning progressed as normally as any other. But by two in the afternoon, it started happening again. By four o'clock, the sun was well on its way toward the eastern horizon, toward the tall buildings I've been dreaming about of late.

Dreaming about of late.

I've been dreaming about rooftops, of peering over the edge once I get up there, to examine all that is wasted below me. It's all so irrelevant and what's even worse, I find myself not just dreaming about rooftops, but actually pulled toward them, drawn to tall buildings,

yearning to look down from high atop the city. I started with my building. Soon, I was taking the elevator to the top floor of any public building and climbing the stairwell to the roof. I'd go up there to get a good look at what was happening with the sun, to figure out its tricks. But the sun would see me up there and start behaving. It wouldn't change directions if I was paying attention.

Those weren't wasted trips to the rooftop, however. I found up there to be a great place for philosophizing. In one of my pensive meanderings, I decided what I'd really like to find was a way to edit my life the way I edited my stories. To erase the clutter, to reshape the disjointed relationships, to clarify the cloudy misunderstandings, to get to the heart of what was important. But here's what scared me. If I found a way to wipe out all of the wasted time in my past, my "meaningless adverbs of life," would I get a chance to put that time to better use? Or would I simply lose that time? Because if that was the case, it would be better to waste time than to simply not have it. Which seems rather absurd.

Then I wondered, could you edit the future as well? Let's say I took all those wasted years that I'd edited from the past, then erased all of the time that I would surely continue to waste in the future – the pointless detours, the bombast, the redundancies that I can never seem to do away with. Would I shorten my entire life span to less than the years I've already lived? To the point where I'd vanish? Could I edit myself out of existence?

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I'm drifting in thought about editing my life when I realize I actually *am* on a rooftop somewhere in the city, leaning over the railing. I'm standing there, not really moving, but it feels like I am, swaying in the wind. My eyes zoom in at the ground, how many stories below?

The street is familiar with so many, many cars, but the view is different. I decide it's not my street so for a moment I am disoriented. Then I realize: Fifth Avenue.

The wind is strong and I get that queasy feeling you get on the roller coaster, where your stomach jumps to your throat and your knees turn rubbery. You're dropping, and it feels like you're out of control. I lean farther and farther out from my perch, my belt buckle catching on the railing, and I'm balancing on my belly, my arms outstretched. My feet aren't more than an inch off the ground, but they're far enough off to give me a dizzying sensation of helplessness, of falling – which sends a wave of woozy panic rushing through me. So I flinch, which only amplifies this disorienting sense of helplessness.

I reach back and grab the railing, and these one-word stories fly at me, like "Oops" and "Splat." I begin to hear them out loud, a voice in the wind calling my name. Jack, I hear in the wind. Jack. Maybe that's why I'm not entirely surprised to feel Ed Tavish's hand on my shoulder, pulling me back.

"What are you doing up here?" I ask. He looks startled, pale. I figure I do too. "For that matter," I say, "what am I doing here?" I notice I'm holding my Reggie Jackson baseball, and I don't know why.

Ed puts his arm around my shoulder and I'm thinking, what a great agent he is. "I'm glad you're here," I say as he leads me toward the stairwell. "I've been meaning to ask you about the sun." There have been some strange things going on here lately that I wanted to tell him about. And I wondered, too, if he had ever seen Reggie Jackson play.