

## Writer's Block

“Whatcha drawing?” came a young, confident voice over the whine of a steam wand and the grind of coffee beans.

A weathered hand stopped and wrinkled eyes turned to face a pair of bright, curious blue eyes curtained in blonde bangs. They belonged to a girl perhaps 11 or 12 years old who had appeared beside the man as he was distracted by something. Deep lines furled into a smile, just as they had been trained to do over the years.

“I’m not drawing,” the response matched the twinkle in his eye.

“Oh. Well, whatcha writin’ then?” the girl responded undeterred. The old man leaned back in his chair and chuckled softly to himself.

“I’m writin’ a story,” he said, keeping his eyes trained on the girl as she surveyed the papers before him. He rightly assumed that this would warrant more questions from the curious mind standing beside him.

“What’s it about?”

“A good question. I haven’t quite sorted that bit out just yet,” he said, looking back at his papers. This made the girl wrinkle her brows together in deep thought, although, deep as this thought was, it didn’t give her nearly as many wrinkles on her brow as the old man had collected on his brow over the years from thinking his own deep thoughts.

“But,” she finally brought her thought to surface, “how can you write a story if you don’t know what it’s about?”

“An even *gooder* question!” said the man, clapping his hands together, nearly losing his pen in the process.

“Wait!” the girl interjected, “‘gooder’ isn’t a word!” She eyed the old man suspiciously, waiting to see how he would react to this accusation.

“Sure it is, I just made it up!” said the man matter-of-factly. This caught the girl off-guard.

“You can’t just make up words,” she said with waning confidence, then added, “can you?”

“Of course! If you can make up a story, you can make up words too. After all, somebody had to make up all the words we’re using to talk to one another right now. Go on, you try it! Make up a word.” The man’s face was aglow with anticipation. The girl took this challenge very seriously. The inner workings of her brain were making their way into expressions on her face until finally they came together to form a look of discovery.

“Deeleeray!” she exclaimed.

“A wonderful word indeed! Very well done! Now,” the man said with upturned brow, “what does it mean?” The girl looked confused. She hadn’t thought that far yet.

“It, it doesn’t mean anything,” she said, almost dejectedly.

“Why, of course it does!” the man exhorted.

“Well, I don’t know. I’ve only just made it up, how am I supposed to know what it means?” she said, tilting her head the way a dog does when it’s heard the familiar voice of its friend say something unfamiliar.

“That’s the best part!” said the man, finally turning in his seat to face the girl. “When you create something new, *you* get to give it the gift of meaning,” he said, pointing his pen toward the girl. “So, Master Lexicographer,” this made the girl giggle, “what *does* ‘deeleeray’ mean, hmm?”

“That’s not my name!” the girl laughed.

“Good heavens! Pardon me, I’ve forgotten my manners!” the man said, throwing his arms up melodramatically. “Forgive me my insolence, I am Bartholomew Walters at your service,” he said with a crooked bow, limited by arthritis and the angle at which he was now sitting in his chair, “but my friends all call me Barty”. Following his lead, the girl performed a curtsy before sticking her hand out. The weathered hand deftly spun the pen around to cradle it in knobby knuckles such that it would not jab the tender hand reaching out to shake it. Her hand disappeared in his as they shook.

“I’m Lexi. Just Lexi. *Not* lexi—lexicog—what did you call me earlier?”

“Of course! Lexi Lexicographer—”

“Yeah, *that*! Um, what *is* that? Is that also a made-up word?”

“Not quite,” Barty said with a chuckle. “But I see why you thought I *was* making it up—*lexicographer* is not a very common word—and what a coincidence that it starts with the very same letters that make *your* name! I think it has a rather nice ring to it, wouldn’t you agree, Lexi Lexicographer?”

“I guess, but I still don’t know what it means,” Lexi said imploringly.

“Ah, yes, let’s see. Well, you know what a dictionary is, yes?” Lexi nodded. “Well, a person who gathers all those words and meanings and puts them together into a dictionary, they would be called a lexicographer. And since you’ve just made up a very delightful new word, I would say that makes you, Lexi, a lexicographer,” Barty said, smiling at the girl.

“Okay, I get it. I like it!” Lexi said, returning the smile.

“Now, Lexi, there’s only one thing left to do. You are the Master Lexicographer. You, and only you, can imbue your creation with meaning. So, what *meaning* shall you give to

‘deeleeray’?” Barty’s eyes peered down expectantly at the girl through bristly brows. Lexi’s eyes grew bright with determination now as she exercised her imagination. No man in her life had ever given her this much authority before. Given permission to exert the fullest extent of her creativity, Lexi looked as though she may soar right out of her shoes. All at once, the thought found some traction and her face lit up with inspiration.

“I got it!” Lexi nearly squealed with excitement.

“Wonderful! What meaning did you give it?” Barty leaned forward attentively.

“Deeleeray is when you untangle your brain, but not like *actually* untangle your *real* brain, but like, when you have a thought on the tip of your brain and you untangle it and POOF!” Lexi clapped her hands together as she said it, “you remember your thought! Deeleeray!”

“Now, that *is* a fabulous word,” Barty said more to himself than to Lexi as he mindlessly grappled with the wiry hairs on his chin. “You know, Lexi, I think you’re really onto something. I must ask, what do you like to write about?” Lexi wasn’t quite prepared for this question. Had he asked *if* she was even a writer at all, she could have answered easily, but that was not the question Barty had asked.

“I, I’m not really sure. I’m not a writer like you—”

“Of course you’re not a writer like me!” Barty interrupted. He knew well that Lexi had not meant *like you* to be a comparison, but he also adamantly rejected the notion of the words that preceded them—*I’m not a writer*. “You are very much correct in saying you’re not a writer *like me*, and you shouldn’t be a writer *like me*, because then you wouldn’t be a writer *like you*.”

“But, no, I mean, I’m not a writer at all,” Lexi tried to backtrack.

“Nonsense! Anyone who has a story to tell can be a writer, and since I believe we all have a story to tell, we are all writers. So let me rephrase my question, Lexi, what *stories* do you like to tell?” This question was more to her liking.

“Hmm, well, I guess I like mysteries. But not detective mysteries. *Magic* mysteries,” as the words came out of her mouth, Barty could swear he saw a twinkling like constellations rearranging themselves in Lexi’s eyes.

“A magic mystery, huh? You’ll have to tell me, what makes a magic mystery?” Barty asked. Lexi delivered.

“Oh, you know, dragons and princesses and a creepy old wizard who actually turns out to be a good wizard, and knights, horses, *lots* of horses, and horses that can fly!” Lexi was quite enjoying the world she was creating.

“Ah, I see! And what mystery will these characters be solving?”

“Well, *obviously*,” Lexi said as matter-of-factly as only a preteen can and putting her hands on her hips, “who is the princess going to marry.”

“But of course! And, does your princess *want* to get married?” Barty continued to tease out more of the emerging story.

“Heck no!” Lexi said emphatically, “My mom says the only thing marriage is good for is all th’ money once it’s over!” To Lexi’s amusement, this made Barty laugh a great, big, hearty laugh. He decided as he wiped the corners of his eyes not to correct Lexi’s misunderstanding of *alimony*. She was, after all, not wrong in her interpretation of what her mom said. “Besides,” Lexi continued, leaning in to whisper as though telling Barty a secret, “if my princess is busy being married, who’s going to find the stolen amulet?”

“How true!” Barty commended. “I must say, you are quite the storyteller for your age! Have you written this story down?”

“No,” Lexi said, looking down, “I’m not a writer like—I mean, I’m just not a writer.”

“Would you like to be?” This invitation drew Lexi’s eyes back up to meet Barty’s.

“How do I do that?” Lexi whispered.

“It’s easy. I’ll show you how,” Barty whispered back. “Look around, Lexi. There are stories unfolding all around us,” Barty spread his hands out, as if to present the scene like it was his own creation. “Out the window, you see the mailman? He’s walking with a limp. That’s a story. Perhaps he has a blister, or maybe he’s nursing an injury after doing battle with his old nemesis, the dog. Or that woman sitting in the corner table, that’s another story. She got her coffee twenty minutes ago but hasn’t taken a sip. Maybe the order was wrong and she’s too shy to have her drink remade, or perhaps she’s waiting for a date who stood her up, but he didn’t *really* stand her up. He’s actually just running late because in his preoccupation to meet the woman, he forgot to latch his gate so his dog got out—the very same dog who gave the mailman his limp. Now, can you smell that? A hint of something burning is poking through the smell of pastries and espresso. Did the barista forget a bagel in the toaster oven? Or did she leave it on purpose to scorn the guy who ordered it in the drive-thru because he’s giving her a hard time after she wouldn’t give him her number? And that woman who’s been drinking her coffee at the bar and talking with the barista the whole time? Maybe, just maybe, she’s actually a spy, and her partner is working undercover as a barista because one of her regulars is a smuggler who just stole an ancient amulet from a princess!” Lexi, who had been listening with wide-eyed wonder at these stories hiding in plain sight was now laughing.

“I don’t think so,” she said, finally composing herself, “the woman at the bar is my mom! The barista is her best friend, Dani. Her real name is Danielle, but she goes by Dani. They’re probably just updating each other on the latest guys they’ve been seeing.”

“Perhaps, but then again, that sounds like a good cover story for a spy.” Barty then became very serious. Leaning forward, his eyes narrowed in a piercing squint, “Lexi, are *you* a spy?”

“What? No!” she laughed

“But you can be,” Barty replied. “When you are a storyteller, you can become whosoever you wish to be. The world and worlds beyond are your playground!” Lexi thought about this for a short while before finally asking,

“What’s the difference between a storyteller and writer?”

“A storyteller finds the stories that are hiding in plain sight. They see the world around them, not for what it is, but for what it can be. The writer then takes what is unseen and makes it visible to others. They take what’s in here,” Barty said, pointing a finger at his temple, “and they put it here,” his finger found one of the pages on the table, “and in so doing, they take a story that might otherwise only exist inside the mind and they do something incredible with it. They take the imagination, and they make it *real*.” He could see Lexi was thinking hard about this. “You asked earlier how I could write a story without knowing what it’s about and I’ll tell you. Sometimes when you look at the stories the world is telling, they don’t make much sense. But you must write them down all the same because if you don’t, they might never get their chance to be told, to become *real*. So when I said I don’t know what this story is about,” he said, motioning again to the papers on the table, “it’s because I don’t know yet what they mean. These stories are all tangled up, and I’m hoping that in writing them out, they will start to take the

shape of a story that makes sense. I suppose, Lexi, what I'm looking for in these stories is *deeleeray*."

"That gives me an idea!" Lexi said, excitedly.

"Wonderful! You know what you must do then? Lexi, are you ready to become a writer?"

"Yes! Yes I am!"

"No matter how fantastic or dull or benign or dangerous your ideas may be to the status quo?"

"I'm ready!"

"Do you promise not to let these stories live and die within your mind, never to be made real as ink on the page?"

"I promise!"

"In that case, Lexi, I bestow unto you, the most important tool of our craft. I want you to have my pen. Take it, *use* it to bring your ideas to life!"

Lexi reached out, hesitated for a second, then took the pen, marveling at its craftsmanship. She sat down at the end of the table opposite Barty and took a blank piece of paper. Wonder filled her eyes as ink glided across the page. Barty was imagining a skater dancing on the ice as he sat watching Lexi write. He hadn't noticed Dani the barista appearing at his side.

"Mr. Walters, I have that shot for you" Dani said.

"Oh, I didn't order an espresso, did I?" Barty said, looking at Dani confused.



“Oh Mr. Walters, you’re so funny,” she chuckled, reaching for Barty’s arm to wipe it. “It’s not espresso, silly,” she said, pulling a syringe from her apron. “It’s your Haldol.” Without a moment’s hesitation, Dani plunged a needle into his arm.

“Wh- how- wait a minute!” Barty said, looking around frantically. The warm walls of the coffee shop were somewhere between crumbling and melting away, leaving cold, sterile, off-white walls in their place. Dani’s apron was gone; scrubs had replaced it. The limping mailman walked inside what had been the lobby of a coffee shop moments before, but he now wore a white jacket and his messenger bag full of letters addressed to no one now took the form of a stethoscope draped around his collar. The woman at the bar, Lexi’s mom, was nowhere to be seen, and the woman in the corner waiting for a date who would never show was replaced with a linen bin, empty and hollow.

“How’d your pen end up way over here? Here you go, Mr. Walters,” Dani said, handing the pen back to him.

“But, I gave this to—” Barty looked across the table at where Lexi had been sitting a moment ago. Only a shadow of the little girl remained, barely a wisp, and even that was fading quick.

“How are we doing today, Mr. Walters?” asked the doctor with the limp, then turning to Dani, “Has he said much this morning?”

“Hardly a word,” Dani said.

“Are you writing something, Mr. Walters?” asked the doctor, looking at the pages in front of Barty. The doctor picked up the page Lexi had been writing on.

“He hasn’t written a single word since he’s been here,” Dani said, “but he insists on having materials to write with at all times. The last time one of the staff accidentally threw out some of his papers, it took five nurses to restrain him.”

“Interesting,” said the doctor, still looking at the page he had picked up. “Does this mean anything to you?” he asked, handing the page to Dani.

“No,” she said. “This is new. I’ll have to ask the other nurses if they know.”

“Alright. Well, in the meantime, I’m going to try him on a new medication this afternoon to see if we can get the hallucinations better managed. Keep me updated with any changes.”

“Thanks doctor, will do,” Dani replied. She looked again at the page the doctor had handed her before setting it back in front of Barty. “What is this Mr. Walters?”

He sat looking at the page for a long while, but no response came to him. After a long silence, Dani left the room. Barty continued to stare at the single word scratched on the page, and after a while, the word stared back. He knew what it meant, or at least he thought he did, but its meaning remained elusive, standing firm on the tip of his brain, but never coming any closer than that.