

3400 words

MRS SWEET

Dear Mr Harrison:

I herd about you in a ad in Writers Day. Writing storys is my life, Mr Harrison on account I live with my son. My sister and daughter dide in Florida in a car wreck and burned to death.

Henry dide fell off a horse hitting his head. Doctor said he never woke up. Theres people want to get the money left me but they wont its hid.

All I got is writing. Wrote lots but mostly in my head. Movies too. Wrote Eternal Happiness. Gave it to the man he called it The Robe got \$7000,000 for it I never got a penny. I wrote ten others same thing. I love witting and have many storys for you. What I want to know is.

Can you get these printed righte now? I want 2 hundred dollars each one to pay the Doctor. I want one Saturday Evening Post the rest up to you. You know I need money too for the missionary. Jesus Bless You.

I am yrs.

Beatrice Temple Sweet

Dear Mrs. Sweet:

Thanks very much for your letter. I'm pleased to hear of your interest in our agency and I look forward to a long and profitable relationship.

I'd be happy to work with you on your stories, and to this end I'm enclosing a copy of our booklet. As you'll see on page 10, our rate for short stories is \$12 per story of 10,000 words or less.

Sincerely,

Howard Harrison

HH:mn enc.

Dear Mr. Harrison:

Yr letter made me so happy I didn't know it was true. Jesus Bless You a thousand times. Jay says writting is wasting my time but I love it and have nothing to do exept. I am 65 yrs old my husband dide. I live upstairs and cant eat with them.

I showed some stories to Jay he thinks their stupid but the woman from the Ladys Home Journal Magazine said they were good. I give her \$25 to read them she wanted to print them but never did. I'm sick to death and onley want them published Mr Harrison will you please do it? That money is a lot I have very little. I will send it to you though.

I have many storys about my life what ones should I write? My grand mother Asa saw visions and taught me to especially after Henry dide. When I was a girl Father took a flatworm out me 20 feet long head tore off. I spit up blood 9 month. Will that make a good story? I have

many others what do you want? I think all day about stories, my son says If your so good why dont you sell them? I tell him I will with Mr Harrison. He don't believe me.

I go every night to see my friends who live behind the times and wear old fashioned. They disappear but I cant and wish I could. The one is Queen Z who Invented the Univers, they say I look like her. They act nice and talk a lot. My grandmother would be a good story. I could make two what do you think? She was a fine woman too good and kind for her own good because her children turned up bad. Her son a minister killed his sister. I think of many storys all true. This story good to be read by Negros, Russian women, other misfits. Pleas tell me what to write, I pray for you every nite and hope you'll sell me. Jay wont lend money for this its my own and I have to pay the television. Can you make it smaller for me? I have onley a pension. Jesus Bless You.

I am yrs.

Beatrice Temple Sweet

Dear Mrs. Sweet:

Thanks very much for your letter. It's always satisfying to know something about the backgrounds of our clients.

I'm afraid we can't make any special reduction in the required fee, Mrs. Sweet. We receive many such requests each year and, of course, if we honored them all we'd go out of business, since the fee is sufficient only to cover our expenses.

I'm very interested in your projected story ideas. I don't think the tapeworm story would go well on the market, so perhaps it'd be best if you begin with the story about your grandmother. I'm looking forward to working with you on it.

Sincerely,

Howard Harrison

HH:mn

Dear Mr Harrison:

I know your my onley friend. I tell everybody your selling my storys in New York. They said Whats a stupid woman doing writting storys? I know I'll be famos writting pretty soon with your help. Jays mad I had to borrow money for this, I told him "I'll lauf all the way to the bank and then I'll move out." That's a joke I heard on television. Ill write a television story too.

Enclosed pleas find my first story. About my Grandmother killed accidentilly by a bull. Lived in Louisiana. Everything in it is true. Will you print it this month? Jay says Do you really pray evry nite for your storys? I say yes and you too thogh you only love money. Jesus Bless You.

I am yrs.

Beatrice Temple Sweet

Dear Mrs. Sweet:

Thanks very much for the opportunity to consider your story, "Heart's Rapture," for possible publication.

There are many strong points to this story, Mrs. Sweet. For one thing, you certainly write well. Your prose is terse, lucid, and concise. Your characters are well-delineated and sharply etched. In short, you offer the reader an economy of style that makes your story a pleasure to read.

I'm afraid, however, that it lacks dynamic structure and focus. You do not provide the reader with an engrossing narrative that will maintain his interest. To be frank (and I must be frank if I'm to be helpful), it's static and weakly plotted.

What actually happens in the story? Let's look and see. Lucy is rescued by Bob during a flood. They fall in love. She's reviled by his parents for having Negro blood. Bob then decides to go to California for two years. Lucy meets Arthur, who is wealthy, and marries him. Arthur is cruel to her, beats her, etc. Then, two years later, she receives a letter from Bob, announcing that he's coming home. One the day he's due, Arthur is killed in a fall from his horse. Bob, it turns out, has struck it rich and they plan to marry. They do, and apparently live happily until Lucy, on her fortieth birthday, is killed by a bull.

This is basically familiar material, Mrs. Sweet, and there's little demand for it today. The protagonist is passive, unable to determine her own fate, and the reader has difficulty identifying with her. Furthermore, you make use of coincidence, a technique to be avoided in story-telling. Coincidences are interesting in real life because they just happen; no one has arranged them. In a story, someone is arranging them (the author) and the illusion of reality is shattered.

Despite its virtues, it lacks the total impact that would make it a strong sell, so I'll have to return it to you as unmarketable. Since the flaws are basic to the total fabric, I can't recommend

a rewrite. I do hope you'll keep at it however. You have a remarkable talent, and I'm looking forward to seeing more of your work.

Sincerely,

Howard Harrison

HH:mn enc.

Dear Mr Harrison:

Jesus Bless You for all the good things you said. I am so disappointed by yr letter I cant think. You took my money and didnt print my story. It was too bad I guess. I dont know why its no good. It all happen just like I say he really dide falling off a horse. I shode the story to a lady said it was the best story she ever read, made her cry. She reads the magazines same as you.

I will bring in the next story myself, come on the train and talk to you about. You say it isn't real but everything in it is true and I don't understand that. I hope you like this I havent anymore money. Your a good man Mr. Harrison, Jesus Bless You.

I am yrs.

Beatrice Temple Sweet

Dear Mrs. Sweet:

Thanks very much for your letter. I'm sorry "Heart's Rapture" wasn't saleable, but I expect much more from you in the future. In writing, as in any other craft, there is a certain period of apprenticeship that must be endured.

I'd be happy to see you if you choose to come into town. If you do, please give us a call first, so I can clear my busy schedule.

Sincerely,

Howard Harrison

HH:mn

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"Howard Harrison Literary Agency. Good morning."

"Mr. Harrison, please."

"Who should I say is calling?"

"Beatrice Temple Sweet. The writer."

"One moment please." The receptionist held the phone against her cheek to the count of ten. "I'm terribly, sorry, Miss Sweet..."

"Mrs. Sweet, Miss."

"Mr. Harrison is in conference, Mrs. Sweet. Would you care to speak to one of his associates?"

"I'll call him back."

"I'm afraid he'll be busy all day, Mrs. Sweet. Is there anything special you wanted to know?"

"I want to see Mr. Harrison, my agent."

"You can speak to one of his associate editors at any time, Mrs..."

"They don't know my stories."

"Oh, everyone reads your stories, Mrs. Sweet. If you'd like to talk to one of...."

"I'll come up next week and talk to Mr. Harrison when he isn't busy."

"I'm afraid next week Mr. Harrison has an appointment on the West Coast. He has movie contracts to sign."

"I have to see him in person. He writes the letters to me. I'll come in the week after. You tell him Beatrice Temple Sweet called, Miss. He wants to see me. I have a definite talent he said. He wants to see my stories."

"I know he does, Mrs. Sweet, but he's a very busy man. You might want to speak with one of his staff editors."

"You just tell him. Goodbye."

"Goodbye, Mrs. Sweet."

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She arrived a week later, strode past the framed covers of Mailer, Clarke, Oates, Bourjaily and the potted leaves in the waiting alcove until she faced the back of the receptionist's head and rested her handbag and manila envelope on the railing before the desk. She settled her weight on one foot and then the other. Her ankles bent outward. The office door sighed and clicked.

"I'm here to see Mr. Harrison."

The receptionist turned on her C Level smile.

"Who shall I say is calling?"

"Mrs. Beatrice Temple Sweet."

"You don't have an appointment, do you, Mrs. Sweet?"

"You tell Mr. Harrison I'm here, please."

"One moment." The receptionist wrote "Beatrice Sweet" on a note pad, tore it off, swiveled, rose, and walked around the corner to the desks of the two men who wrote all the letters in Harold Harrison's name. "Manny, there's a Beatrice Sweet who wants to see Howard. You want to come talk to her?"

"Of course not."

"Arnold? Arnie?" She made her plea sound like an invitation.

"She's *his*," said the younger man, hired a year ago.

"I'll get her file." She returned to her desk.

"Mr. Harrison is on the phone now with one of his magazine editors, Mrs. Sweet, so I've asked his associate, Mr. Newburgh, to see you. Please have a seat. He'll be here in a moment."

"I'll stand and I want Mr. Harrison just himself, Miss."

"Mr. Harrison is tied up with a very important deal. Please sit down." She went to the filing cabinet, found the Sweet, Beatrice file and brought it to Manny.

"What's she like?"

"A cross between a walrus and a cockatoo and she's giving me a lot of trouble. A kook."

Mrs. Sweet was still standing when the receptionist returned. Manny read the last few letters in the file.

"Arnold."

"What?" The young man did not turn from his typewriter. They were paid by the letter and did not like to be interrupted. Arnold could type 90 words a minute, 60 if he had to think at the same time.

"It's the 20 foot tapeworm."

"Have fun."

Manny pulled on his jacket, straightened his tie, turned the corner. "Mrs. Sweet? I'm Manny Newburgh, Mr. Harrison's literary associate. How are you?"

"I don't want to talk to you. I want to talk to Mr. Harrison."

"I'm afraid he's tied up. Why don't we sit?"

"You sit." Her eyes fixed on the gate behind him that separated the waiting area from the office. Her mouth tightened. She lifted her purse from the padded bench. Manny backed till his hip touched the gate. Arnold Brook came to the water cooler and pretended to study a manuscript while he watched.

The receptionist reawakened her smile and clasped her hands. "Now then, Mrs. Sweet, why don't you tell me when you're available to see Mr. Harrison this week? I'll break in on him and settle it now. Ok?" She took up a pad and pencil.

"That's what I want, Miss. You're very kind. You tell him any day but Friday cause I have to take care of Jay's kids. In the morning."

"I'll arrange an interview right away." Manny opened the gate for her. She turned the corner and sat on the edge of Manny's desk, biting her pencil. She bit her lip and smiled at Arnold for sympathy, which is hard to do. He raised an eyebrow and peered back at Mrs. Sweet. Manny was speaking to her softly, like an animal trainer.

"So, you brought us another of your stories, Mrs. Sweet."

She hauled her bag to the bench and pulled handwritten pages out of the manila envelope.

"I got them right here. I think this is a better story than that other. You read that other?"

"Of course."

"You like it?"

"Very much. There were a number of weaknesses, but...."

"I know. This one is good. You and Mr. Harrison read it and send it to an editor. It's definitely the best one, I had a woman read it. She said it was dramatically exciting."

"Of course we'll have to evaluate it, and...."

"You go ahead. You know what magazine to print it. That's why Mr. Harrison is my agent."

"Why don't you let me have the manuscript and your fee now, Mrs. Sweet? So we can finish the processing."

"Oh no, I just give this to Mr. Harrison. He's my agent. Everybody knows that."

The receptionist rounded the corner, pencil and paper borne like a pass from the principal.

"Here you are Mrs. Sweet. Mr. Harrison has agreed to see you Friday morning at 10:30. Ok?"

"That's the time I can't."

"Oh, I'm awfully sorry. We did our best. You can't ask for more than that, can you? We tried to fit you in, but if you're going to refuse...."

"It ain't fair. It ain't fair I shouldn't get to see him. I don't know what to do." She sank to the bench beneath unsigned photos of Vidal, Nixon, Salinger, stared at her shoes like calluses around her feet.

"You just want my money."

Manny stepped toward her. "That's hardly sensible now, is it? It's to your best interest that Mr. Harrison is a busy man. Suppose he sat in his office all day doing nothing? Would you want him as your agent?"

"Jay's gonna be awful mad if I don't watch his kids." She gazed as if the answer lay above Manny's head. Ok, Jay'll hafta watch them himself. I'll come see Mr. Harrison Friday morning."

Arnold stopped pretending, stepped out from behind the cooler, watched Mrs. Sweet collect her bag and stuff the pages into the envelope. Manny leaned in to help her. "There's something I didn't mention, Mrs. Sweet, since I thought there'd be no need to bring it up. Mr. Harrison's time, as in any other business, is worth a considerable amount of money. If you're going to consult with him, you have to compensate him for the time he would be spending marketing your stories. You don't want to waste his time, do you? So we have to charge a fee..."

She rose. Somehow as the muscles of her jaw stiffened, her cheeks shook. The recessed speakers played Blue Moon.

"How much?"

"His standard rate is \$150 an hour."

The penciled lines above her eyes tilted. The orange and green feathers on her hat twitched confusedly, everything about her now sudden.

"You thieves. You goddamn thieves! I'm an old lady. I like to write stories. I don't want to have to pay a million dollars to have my stories printed. I just wanta have them in magazines, I don't want to pay. I don't have any money. You told me you'd print them, you kids. You kids! You everyone of you hate me, you're worms, you're little worms can't let an old lady write her stories." Her mouth opened and shut involuntarily. Manny touched her shoulder and she struck out against his chest.

"If you don't lower your voice, Mrs. Sweet, I'll have to ask you to leave. I'm only telling you the standard procedure."

"You made it up against me." Her voice quieted. She wiped a spot on her chin with her coat sleeve. "He told me I was a good writer."

"You are, Mrs. Sweet."

"You just want my money."

"We want you to *make* money. You know the best magazines pay hundreds of dollars and a good advance." He'd slipped. Perhaps it was the photo of Gore Vidal. "I mean for novels."

"Money early?"

"Novels."

"Big stories."

"You could say that." He pinched his nose, covering his mouth.

"If I give you this one, you'll sell it? It's good. It's a true story I know."

"We'll do all we can to push it, Mrs. Sweet."

She handed him the envelope. The veins in her hands stood cold under her skin.

"And the money."

She searched her purse, each motion a hiccup and tremor, counted out two five dollar bills and two one dollar bills and gave them to Manny, who gestured for a paperclip and attached the bills to the top of the envelope.

"Thanks ever so much, Mrs. Sweet. You won't regret this. We're proud to help people like you get your start in literature. Goodbye."

"Goodbye." She tugged at her handbag and turned. Her coat, like her hair, balded in the back.

Arnold took a drink from the water cooler. Manny gave the envelope and money to the receptionist and pushed the gate. Arnold crushed his cup, dropped it in the trash. The sigh and click of the entrance door surprised them all.

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She stood curdled before the elevator doors.

"Mrs. Sweet," said Arnold. A bell rang on a floor below or above. "I'm from the agency. Harrison Agency."

"The other guy. I seen you spying on me."

"No. I was interested."

"In me?"

But he had an honest face. Someone said she had an eye for detail, maybe Mr. Harrison. He'd come to invite her back in, apologize, we made a mistake, Mr. Harrison would be happy to ... in advance...

The bell rang nearer.

“I wanted to give you,” said Arnold. He fumbled at his wallet. Three bills lay starchly in his hand. “I have three fives. You can use the rest for a cab.”

“That’s more than I paid.”

“You shouldn’t waste your money is all.” He picked at the bills, smoothed the topmost, held them out to her.

“It’s *more*,” she said, “I *know* it’s more. Mr. Harrison was listening through the wall. He sent you to me. He told you, didn’t he? He told you, Give her the *advance*.”

“I only wanted.”

“Jesus bless you,” she said, patting the bills, “and Mr. Harrison. He knew that other one was lying.”

Arnold reached around her to press the lucite button Down. Mrs. Sweet clasped the money like a talisman.

The bell rang. The red triangle pointed. The flared Deco fans parted to either side. She stepped in, held the doors open.

“He *sent* you,” she said, “his messenger. You.”

Arnold watched the hushed doors close, the bronze fans come together, sealing off the air between.

END