

Who could have known that the Nigerians would be running a scam to collect short stories submitted to *The New Yorker*? And what were they planning to do with these short stories they stripped from the hearts and minds of hapless writers worldwide anyways?

Stuart rereads the acceptance letter he received so many months ago, the acceptance letter he thought would change his life for the better:

Dear Stuart Sulloway,

I wish to congratulate you on your short story, *Through the Texts of Time: A Blatant Treaty on Remorse and Elongated Romance(s)*.

I am the son of the late Dr. Collins Keshi, and am interim editor at The New Yorker while Deborah Treisman is visiting the Galapagos Islands. Sitting at my desk in New York—where I live, I assure you—I was overcome with heartfelt emotion after finishing your story. Who could have known that Tomás Brickfast would lose not only his leg, but his unmentionables *and* his left nipple in pursuit of the thing he loved the most? And what a trick ending! That last sentence of yours, *And then he woke up from his dream*—no one could have seen that one coming! Mr. Sulloway, I applaud you.

Attached to this e-mail is a letter of consent regarding future publication. Please sign the letter (note: pages 1-3 of the letter are in my possession and deal with typeface so you don't need to see them), and mail it to this address:

Kassim Keshi c/o The New Yorker
PO BOX 1121
New York, NY, 10011-4668

I am excited to publish your piece in an upcoming issue! Please send the letter of consent at your earliest scheduled convenience.

Sincerely yours,

Kassim Keshi

After reading the e-mail, Stuart Sulloway did what any sane writer would do upon getting accepted in *The New Yorker*—he quit his day job. That same night, he gently tried to explain to his wife that while she'd been supportive during his formative years, his life had since taken a turn for the better and he would soon be seeking a divorce.

"Honey, I'll always love you," he said, thinking in the voice Tomás, the lead protagonist from his soon to be published story. It was just the start, really. First *The New Yorker*, then NPR or Oprah's Book Club, then he'd be debating immigration policy with Bill O'Reilly, or getting biting comical jabs from Steve Colbert. And that was just the start. Soon he would unveil his magnum opus: *Zombie Lolita*.

"Always. Love. Me?" Becky sobbed. "You. Bastard."

"Please, don't talk like that." He imagined her talking in those little word bubbles from comic books.

"I. Can't. Believe. You."

"Honey. I. Told. You. If. It. Ever. Came. To. This. I. Might. Leave. You." he said, in a tone that was both mocking and sincere.

There was the problem of their son, Quinn, a suspiciously quiet eleven year old named after a character from Asimov's *I, Robot*. That and their mortgage, but Stuart was pretty sure the book deal would come and the seven-figure advance alone would pay off the mortgage. Besides, Becky could raise Quinn on her own. They were always closer anyhow. Becky, of course, didn't agree with this plan, but there comes a time in an artist's life when he or she has to be selfish and for Stuart, that time had finally come.

As he mailed the permission form the next morning, Stuart thought of *Zombie Lolita*, the book that would soon make him a household name. In his remake of the classic novel, he'd switch Humbert Humbert for a necrophiliac middle school teacher named Henrietta Henrietta who falls in love with her husband's first child, a dead boy named Lionel, and their subsequent journey west. For some bizarre reason, everyone loved zombies, especially when they made their way into classic works of literature. Stuart was aware of this, and could feel success looming in the distance, its flesh rotting and its message pedo and cutting edge and guaranteed to make him millions.

To Stuart, selling out simply meant *selling in* to a group of people who actually made money from their writings, enough money that he could light the Cuban cigars that he'd start smoking with flaming Benjamins. He imagined himself owning piles of the green stuff, which he'd keep taped inside the air conditioning in his bedroom or in a briefcase. He wondered how heavy a briefcase full of money would be, and could almost feel adrenaline from carrying such a valuable object in plain sight.

Maybe he'd start a writing serial about a homicide detective who was investigating people at the same time he was killing them, using a nom de plume of course. Or, maybe he'd join forces with another writer a la James Patterson and co-write airport thrillers. Who said the jump from literary to mainstream fiction wasn't possible? What was the point of literary fiction anyway? Who really wanted to read about some nobody's long struggle with existentialism; or some kid getting lost in a city and coming to grips with alienation; or some woman's difficulty in finding her racial and/or cultural identity?

Not Stuart. Well, not anymore anyway. Now that he was fastly approaching a world he'd only imagined, now that he was so close to literary fame he could feel his hand aching from signing books, now that he was closer to literary stardom than many would get—Stuart was ready to do whatever it took to solidify his legacy. Knowing that he needed something that made him distinct, something that separated him from other writers, he decided to give himself a makeover.

On his way home from mailing his letter of consent to *The New Yorker*, Stuart stopped in at a local tattoo shop and thirty minutes later, walked out with a sparkling stud in his left nostril. He figured a nose ring would set him apart from other writers, and it would surely look great in a head shot.

The next logical step would be a change of haircut. Something cutting edge, not quite Korean style, and he didn't have the right length or consistency for corn rolls, but he could definitely do better than his current hairdo. He opted for a faux hawk, not because of its dude-bro underpinnings, but because it *defined* who he was becoming, someone who towed the line and walked the edge at the same time. A rebel with a cause, a writer with a message, a future literary goliath, a potential Dan Brown meets Salmon Rushdie meets Jamaica Kincaid meets Cormac McCarthy meets Anne Rice meets Michael Creighton meets George R. R. Martin meets Emily Bronson meets F. Scott Fitzgerald at an exclusive dinner party jointly hosted by George Saunders and J. K. Rowling (using her pseudonym, of course).

After paying the hairdresser, Stuart Solloway withdrew his savings—nine thousand hard-earned dollars that he'd secretly been stashing away for the last five years as an accountant for Portland's

largest legal firm—and returned home to pack his things and say goodbye to Becky and Quinn. He would disappear like Edward Snowden, but do so in his own country, without the NSA on his tail.

Cash in hand, rolled in a thick wad of hundreds like a drug dealer, Stuart suddenly felt an overwhelming sense of power. With a demented grin on his face, he paraded into the thrift store across the street and purchased a vintage Samsonite briefcase. He took his time thumbing through the cash in front of the store employee, watching as her eyes bulged and her mouth watered. *I'll be back for you*, he thought, dropping the bills onto the counter. At the nod of an invisible hat to the cute woman, Stuart placed the rest of the money in the briefcase and returned to his car.

On his drive home, he thought of what lay next. He needed an agent, but figured he could manage his own affairs for the time being. Why go to them when they can come to you? Besides, as soon as his *New Yorker* piece was published, agents would be bending over backwards to represent him. They'd wait for him like paparazzi—falling from trees, jumping from bushes, or appearing like Oscar the Grouch from trashcans as he walked by. He'd manage his own bidding war, playing the agents off one another and likely being christened the Warren Buffet of the publishing industry after he'd made the cover of Time magazine.

He laughed as he pulled into his driveway, as he looked down at his briefcase brimming with cash. He just needed to grab a few things and begin the long drive to New York. After all, now that he was to be published in *The New Yorker*, it would help if his bio said he lived in Williamsburg or something.

He should've figured Becky would complicate things, but he was so lost in his day dreams, that he didn't anticipate her latching herself onto his leg as soon as he entered the house. He didn't anticipate her begging and crying and pleading. He didn't anticipate her setting fire to his car via a piece of cloth in the gas tank as he packed his bags inside their home. He didn't anticipate the nine thousand dollars in his briefcase going up in flames alongside his only means of transportation.

After the police showed up and Becky was arrested and charged with arson, Stuart was left with a shell of a car and a grief stricken son. Not to worry, he thought, credit cards were made for this very reason. In any event, it would make an interesting narrative, something he could include in his *New Yorker* bio:

Stuart Sulloway, a Portland-native who lives in Williamsburg with his son Quinn, is the survivor of an arsonist attack by his pyromaniac ex-wife. His forthcoming novel, *Zombie Lolita*, will be followed by a collection of short stories entitled, *The Dreams of Stuart Sulloway: An Exploration of Genius and Chance*.

He bought two Greyhound tickets that night for New York, and the next morning, Stuart and Quinn were on their way to the The Big Apple. The trip was long and arduous—as any start to a future epic should be—and highlights of the three day bus ride include Barney, a retired truck driver sitting in front of them who was constantly eating tamales and pork rinds and farting on the hour, every hour; Stella, a former Vegas waitress with tattooed eyeliner, crocodile skin, and a lip ring (she kept saying something about Stuart’s nose ring, but he couldn’t tell if it was a compliment or not); and Enrique, a Columbian man fond of snoring and speaking Spanish in his sleep and hissing like a boa constrictor when he was awake.

It was in New York that Stuart realized he’d made a horrible mistake: in a hurry to catch the bus, he’d left his laptop sitting on the dining room table in Portland. Luckily, this was also what credit cards were for. After several attempts to make purchases using his cards—all of which were swiftly declined—Stuart called the credit card company, and discovered that Becky had maxed out both their cards paying her bail. She’d also canceled their shared debit card.

After kicking a trashcan, Stuart pulled himself together. With the remaining cash he had on him—eighty dollars plus Quinn’s emergency twenty—Stuart found a hotel room in Spanish Harlem. The two bunkered down for the night with a couple bags of potato chips and a king-sized Snickers bar.

Unable to sleep that night, Stuart obsessed over the only option that remained: he would arrive early at *The New Yorker* offices with his print-out of the e-mail from Kassim Keshi, and like any good interim editor, Kassim would give him an advance on the money he was owed for his piece. After he’d received the money, he would fly back to Portland to claim his laptop and subsequently *Zombie Lolita*, which he failed to back-up. His only hope was that Becky hadn’t destroyed it in a fit of rage.

Becky had indeed destroyed Stuart’s laptop in a fit of rage, thus deleting his rough draft of *Zombie Lolita* and all the short stories he’d written over the last year. Before the cathartic cleansing, Becky searched through Stuart’s inbox until she found the e-mail from *The New Yorker*. Needing someone to vent to, she placed a call to the fabled magazine. An intern named Terry picked up, and

after she'd calmed down, Terry explained to Becky that the e-mail her soon-to-be-ex-husband had received was actually part of a Nigerian scam.

With this in mind, Becky drove the hammer down onto the laptop keyboard, deep into its mechanical guts.

After arriving at *The New Yorker* offices the following morning, Stuart quickly realized he'd made an even *bigger* mistake than leaving his laptop in Portland. As the intern Terry explained to him he should have questioned the spurious e-mail and that he had been duped by a Nigerian scam artist; as Terry explained that *The New Yorker* accepts .001% of short story submissions and that he had a better chance of jumping through a flaming Cheerio into a pool of Kanye West sexbots than getting published in the magazine; as Terry explained to him that his wife had called and boy was she angry; as Terry pat him on the shoulder and complimented his nose ring—all Stuart could think about was *Zombie Lolita*.

And he said this to Terry, *Zombie Lolita*, he kept mumbling, and Terry told him quite frankly that that was the stupidest idea for a novel he'd ever heard. And of course Stuart lashed out at him for this. He stood, grabbed the fake tree in the reception area, and hurled it at snobby bearded intern. Security came faster than a room full of virgins and soon, Stuart was lying on a concrete sidewalk outside the magazine's offices, bruised, sobbing, and cursing the sky as a pair of stray dogs sniffed at his ankles. *Zombie Lolita*, he thought, as he took the bus back to the hotel. *Zombie Lolita*, he thought as he made check-out time with Quinn. *Zombie Lolita*, he thought as he called Becky to apologize.

The acceptance letter is still pinned to Stuart's refrigerator in his tiny one bedroom apartment, a constant reminder of delusion and the lengths a man will go once he thinks his dreams have been realized.