

## Good News in an Ice Cream Parlor

At the table by the window, Malcolm sipped his mint tea and waited for his nephew.

Sometimes – many times, really – a story begins as simply as that. A man sits at a table, the table is by a window, he's drinking something, and he's waiting for somebody.

Never, not once in his entire writing career, had Malcolm ever begun a story that simply. He always had to start in outer space, with the spark that begot a new cosmos, or some invisible force that farted out a star and that became a solar system, and all of that was tied together and reined in to connect in some paltry way with his own life, or whatever silly story he was starting. It was always insane and meaningless, that beginning, because Malcolm had always had difficulty with beginnings.

But perhaps, he figured vaguely, he only started writing like that because he saw his own life as so simple and comfortable. Well, perhaps *comfortable* wasn't the best word to use – maybe he was just contented, or he had never bothered to see his life as anything larger than a-

See, *this* right here was his problem. He couldn't take off properly, so he had to ramble a bit to get his storytelling juices flowing. Why couldn't he just say that he was in a coffeeshop? His favorite coffeeshop, the one downtown that doubled as an ice cream parlor. Scoops & Sugars, it was called, and it looked like a ridiculous children's place for children, but six days out of seven it was perfectly quiet and cozy in here, especially in the wintertime when no one cared about ice cream. They started off playing '50s rockabilly stuff in the daytime, something by Bill Haley or Buddy Holly or the like – one of those dead people – and then they'd soften things up a bit with something a little slower by Frankie Lymon or The Platters, then they'd slow it down still further with one of Fats Domino's little ditties. By evening, they gave up and resorted to some light, jazzy muzak that was a little to the left of Dave Brubeck. Nothing that souful, just

elevator music. Malcolm didn't care in the least what they played, so long as it wasn't modern country or death metal. His ears could stand pretty much anything else.

Oh, and of course there was the interior of the place itself – well, it was done up just like any nostalgic '50s throwback with the garish black-and-white checkered floors and the sterile white countertop with dashes of medicinal pink and sickly green tossed about for the sake of secondary colors. There were mirrors everywhere for whatever reason, and all the staff were dressed somewhat begrudgingly in goofy little paper hats and wafer-thin aprons, and the men all had dumb rose-colored bow ties. They had to smile painfully whenever a customer walked up to them; Malcolm wondered if the manager showed them a picture of Dion or Frankie Avalon and told them to just make their mouths look like that.

Malcolm fell back in his plush leather-bound seat and gave a contented sigh, shutting his eyes for a second. There, he'd described the damn place and just about everything in it. This way, if any feds booked him on a false accusation and interrogated him about his whereabouts, he'd have a good description of the place if pressed. He remembered one of his favorite writing professors, an old friend of the family's, telling him to describe every setting in your writing as though you were a secret agent, mentally mapping a location and all its little intricacies, its strengths and weak points, its little hidden corridors and places of entry and exit. As it so happened, they were also in an ice cream parlor – a different one than this – when this conversation took place. Malcolm remembered looking around and asking the professor, "Even this place?" The professor held a spoonful of sherbet to his bearded face and said, "*Epecially* this place. If it's familiar to you, then write about it."

Malcolm only wished he remembered what the place had looked like. For some unfortunate reason, he had wiped it clear out of his memory, never once writing about it. Instead he'd written about places he had no knowledge of – forested hiking trails, drug dens, Irish bogs, military ships. Only through watching so many movies and reading so many other, better books than this had he even gotten a visual of what these places were supposed to look like, but he knew he had no feel of them. Perhaps that was why so

many of them had been turned down flat by publishers, waved away with a polite refusal and a thank you. They should've just told him, 'Write more stories about ice cream parlors, kid'.

But there was his nephew Dylan, crossing the street and shuffling up to the parlor. He had a nervous little smile on his face – or Malcolm *thought* it looked nervous. Dylan opened the door with a soft ding from the silver bell above and found his uncle immediately. Malcolm hovered from his seat an inch and waved to get his nephew's attention, but there was no need. Dylan knew where his uncle always sat.

Oh, better describe Dylan real quick, Malcolm thought. Well, there wasn't much to say about young Dylan except that he was twenty-four years old, a year out of college, nice hazel eyes, short black hair, olive-colored features, dark lips. Scrawny but not unhealthy-looking, well-built, looked as though he ran a lot (which he did). Was Malcolm missing anything else? Well, ~~his nephew's fingers were a bit unusually long~~, but that was a strange sort of thing to fix on unless it played into the story (which it didn't here), so Malcolm decided to ex out that detail.

Ah, he got it, one more important thing – Dylan had the creative writing bug, just like his uncle. He'd wanted to write since he was fifteen, younger than Malcolm had been when he first figured it out (he was about seventeen when he had his moment of clarity). He had written some stuff of his own, for school and for fun, and he'd shown to to his uncle, and well, Malcolm had liked what he'd seen. He was sure that with the passage of a few years, his nephew just might have something.

"You got the mint tea again?" Dylan asked, still grinning, setting aside a brown leather satchel he'd brought with him that he placed next to him on the opposite seat. "Hot or cold?"

"Hot," Malcolm said, "always."

"You kidding?" Dylan asked with that same cheerful expression. "It's, like, eighty-nine degrees out."

It was September while they were discussing this. It was evening, going on 7 o'clock, but it was still unseasonably warm. Malcolm reminded himself to mention the time of day and year earlier in the text.

There was the corner of a piece of paper poking out of the satchel. On closer look, there were multiple pages stapled together. Malcolm nodded toward it. “That your story?”

“Sure is,” Dylan said. “Got it back from the judges today.”

Ah yes, the judges. Three seasoned literary critics who took it upon themselves to review and evaluate up to fifty nonpressional fiction submissions; Dylan had successfully broken through into the finalist ranks. Malcolm smiled bitterly as he remembered what that feeling was like. It was the most dangerous part of the whole ordeal, the moment when Daniel entered the lions’ den and had to convince them not to tear him to shreds. In this instance, the candidates were ruthlessly weaned down from fifty to thirty to twenty to ten, and then five, and finally two before one of the souls had their opportunity snuffed out in the cruelest cut of them all – second place.

Malcolm had made second place a couple of times. He had also made third, and fourth, and fifth. Eventually he reached a point where he avoided writing contents altogether; they ended up being a horrible strain on his blood pressure. It was like a futuristic survival competition, only instead of being artlessly murdered, you were dispatched with a politely-worded rejection slip. Something along the lines of ‘We loved the story, we wish you the best of luck, *but*.’ Like a fucking hangnail on your thumb, that awful single word that dashed your chances. Fucking *but*.

Anyway, Malcolm realized, this was the point where a more efficient writer would have noticed that they were trailing off; he should have described Dylan’s piece by now. Or perhaps the contents of the piece were unimportant and arbitrary. Yeah, good call, they were arbitrary – who gave a shit *what* precisely Dylan’s story was about? Or maybe it wasn’t, maybe the reader would want to know – Christ, someone help him out here...

“You want me to tell you what it’s about?” Dylan asked politely. “I don’t think I mentioned it the last time we talked.”

Hallelujah, Hallelujah, exposition saves the day. Malcolm folded his sweaty hands together, nodded, and sat patiently while Dylan laid the story bare.

It was a period piece, set during the final months of the Third Reich when the Allies were puncturing the motherland from all corners. The story involved a young German farm boy, just some neutral citizen who didn't care one way or another about the Fuhrer's affairs, forced to seek shelter in the Black Forest after a Russian unit demolishes his village. In the forest, there's an older farm girl from a separate village who teaches the boy how to hunt. He's sensitive, and unused to violence. Eventually he and the girl have to use their wits to combat a band of Russian mercenaries who infiltrate their hideout in the forest. Once they evade them, the boy and girl walk onward through the forest, into an uncertain future.

"War setting," Malcolm commented once Dylan was finished with his presentation. "I've been there before." He absent-mindedly dunked the string of his tea bag into his cup all the while.

"I know, I read your old story," Dylan said. "The Bavarian inn, right? With the young female innkeeper and her stubborn old mother and the brother who-."

"Who shoots and kills his fellow officer, yes," Malcolm said quietly. "The bastard was getting drunk and insulting his mother – what else could he do?"

Dylan nodded and said, "They run off into the forest in that story, too, don't they?"

"Yes they do," Malcolm replied. "The mother and the daughter. The brother...he stays behind to face the music. Maybe he gets shot, maybe he escapes." Malcolm shrugged. "It's all open-ended, isn't it?"

"I always liked that one," Dylan said, staring away from his uncle out the window. "It's kinda fascinating, isn't it, the, uh...the common everydayness of the Third Reich? I dunno, that's what always appealed to me about your story."

Malcolm smiled softly; he too looked away. He had always liked the story himself, considered it one of his prouder ones, and he'd wished the publishers and judges had all thought the same. He would have

liked them to say what Dylan was saying right now, all these encouraging comments about the narrative and the story structure. The judges had liked it too, apparently, but not enough to warrant publication in any magazine of theirs. ‘Too controversial’, one judging panel had said. The idea of a sympathetic portrayal of normal citizens in Nazi Germany was ‘too dicey’, according to another rejection. Malcolm felt like telling them all that they should confront his old German grandmother first-hand and tell her that her life experiences were ‘too dicey’.

“Uncle Malcolm?” Dylan said. He looked concerned.

Oh Christ, his thoughts were wandering. He cleared his throat and looked back at his nephew, asking what was up.

“I said they looked at it,” Dylan said.

Malcolm leaned forward in anticipation. “They did? What’d they say?”

Dylan’s smile was there, and then in an instant it was gone. His happy hazel eyes clouded with disappointment.

Malcolm’s heart stung. He knew that look too well. Those polite rejections were the absolute worst of them all, the nicest and at the same time the meanest of all turn-downs. He felt all the world’s sorrow for his sunny-eyed nephew and all the world’s contempt and hatred for the asshole judges who had deemed this sweet kid unworthy of their pages.

In an instant, something clicked internally, and Malcolm didn’t need to think, he just all of a sudden began to talk. He began to talk at his nephew in a single harrowing breath, and what came out was, “Dylan, I’m so sorry, really I am. You know, I hate to say that I’m surprised, but really this kind of rejection is all too common. I know you’re disappointed – believe me, I’m disappointed too. I’ve known plenty of disappointment in my life, and I wish I could say it’s just this once, but it’s a vicious repetitive cycle till finally something comes along and breaks it, and it’s the best fucking day of your life. Dylan,

believe me, this stings now, but don't ever let it get you down. Keep at it and something will come along, for sure it will. You're a talented writer and maybe it's those bullshit judges who are wrong and you're right, but fuck it, that's the system and you just gotta keep plugging and one day-."

"Uncle Malcolm," Dylan said. Malcolm looked at him, and all at once the smile was back. When the hell did it come back? Why had Malcolm not noticed this?

"They accepted it," Dylan said, the smile growing. "They're gonna publish it in their magazine."

Holy shit. This was unanticipated. Malcolm didn't have this anywhere in his internal files. Unprecedented fortune and happiness? Success on the first hand? He felt lost, aimless in this good news.

He coughed out, "You – you did? You...accepted?"

The smile was now an ear-to-ear grin. "Surprised?" his nephew asked.

Surprised? If Hitler himself came up to their table in a paper hat and an apron and asked them which special they fancied tonight, Malcolm couldn't have been more surprised than he was right now. He stretched across the table and hugged his nephew without words, but there were a couple of tears from both of them, and the mood was quietly rapturous. When they settled back into their seats, the waitress (not Hitler) arrived and asked them their fancy, and each man got a slice of strawberry mousse cheesecake and ate in silence while the long bladed fingers of evening light slashed across the table.

In that space of time, Malcolm began to frown. Something was not sitting right with him.

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When they were done with their dishes, they walked out onto the street and paused by a bicycle rack.

They watched as a father and his son, who looked about eleven or twelve, set down something large and colorful onto the rack. It was a macaw, a bright brilliant rainbow-colored creature with a powerful curved

beak that was the color of faded metal. It hugged the bike rack tightly with its clawed feet and uttered a thin, curious squawk, an alien noise in this antiquated small-town setting.

Intrigued, Dylan stepped forward and nodded toward the bird. “South American?” he asked. “It’s beautiful. Where’d you get it?”

The kid had already gone inside the parlor with a wad of cash to buy something before the place closed up, so only the dad was around to hear the question. As he ran a stroking hand along the bird’s incredible down, he replied with a smile, “A specialty pet shop in New Orleans was selling exotic birds. We were down there less than a month ago. He’s only been with us since.”

Malcolm stepped forward and got a good look at the bird himself; the macaw gazed quickly at him and seemed to shrink away, as though made nervous by Malcolm’s presence. Any chance of Malcolm being able to pet it himself was out of the question.

But the bird loved Dylan, and held itself straight and high so Dylan could bend and stroke its wobbling, crimson-tinged throat. “Amazing,” Dylan murmured, “how he doesn’t fly away when he has an opportunity like this.”

The man shrugged. “Where would he go to? All he knows is us.”

Malcolm came closer still and stooped before the bird. He had no words to say to it; the sight of the animal with its feathers reflected in the hueing evening sun was more beautiful and proud than anything he’d ever dared write about. He had been forever concerned with describing ugly things – ugly buildings, creatures, people, landscapes. Even the forest in one of his early stories was a dark, dismal place that invited disappearances and death. He should have inserted something colorful and gorgeous, like this radiant bird right here.

Malcolm still tried to pet it, and eventually he succeeded in getting the bird to stand still for him to dispassionately stroke its backside. The macaw adopted a cold, rigid position, impatient to be rid of Malcolm's unwelcome touch.

"We should get going," he said softly to his nephew after a few minutes. "I wanna take the scenic drive home before it gets dark."

Malcolm had his little black Mazda convertible, a 12-year-old hand-me-down from his own father, the sort of vehicle only conducive for summer and autumn driving. It was a mild, simple thrill to take it along removed country roads and winding, meandering paths through hidden parts of the land. He detoured this evening and took a path that cut through a local state forest, a thin little road that cut through the old-growth trees and shut out any significant amounts of sunlight – a land of permanent shade. The earth was quiet except for the nasally thrum of his motor; neither he nor Dylan felt like getting bugs in their mouths.

They stopped at a low valley that looked out over the nearby lake, which looked as brilliant as the macaw right now with its tranquil waters reflected by the crimson-orange sun, twinkling nonthreateningly and offering an almost melancholy image of a waning autumn day.

But, strangely enough, all Malcolm could focus on as he perched on the Mazda's hood was the plethora of mosquitoes that nipped at his skin, and the overly plump horseflies that soared above them, threatening to bite. He looked over at his nephew, who was leaning over the windshield with his arms crossed and one foot nuzzling the grass just out of reach. His entire attention was captured by the serene beauty of the lake, and nothing else.

"How can you ignore it?" Malcolm asked him all of a sudden. "All these goddamn bugs...I'm dying out here!"

Dylan raised his head to the sky slightly and surveyed the gnats that danced above him. "I guess they just don't bother me tonight," he said simply.

Malcolm scowled while snuffing out a mosquito that had landed right on his neck. He thought about the damn flies and if they were going to lay eggs in his convertible. He hated how exposed everything was; he hated how spiteful nature was being toward him this evening.

“We can leave, if you want,” Dylan said without looking at his uncle. “It’s gonna get dark before long. I know you wanna get home.”

Malcolm shrugged at this, trying to seem aloof. “I don’t mind,” he murmured. “I just don’t wanna risk a doe jumping in front of my car. I already almost dented my hood grazing one of those damn things.”

“They’re beautiful animals, Uncle Malcolm,” Dylan said with infuriating softness. “They’re just curious about us.”

“Well, they cause a lot of trouble!” Malcolm snapped, and he smacked a couple more skeeters on his arm and knee.

Dylan gazed at his uncle then, his face soft and unaccusing. “What’s the matter, Uncle Malcolm?” he asked.

“Nothing’s the matter,” Malcolm grumbled, fidgeting his body to maintain his relaxed position. “It’s just that not everything is...beautiful, like you say.”

“Have I done something?” Dylan asked. He still sounded so kind, and polite. “Have I *said* something?”

Malcolm said nothing back. He, too, had begun to ignore the flies and gnats as he shut his eyes and pressed his fingers to his temple. He let out a thin, barely audible sigh as he did so.

Dylan paused, watching him closely, and then said, “Does it have something to do with my story?”

Yes, of course it did. Congratulations, kid, you’ve won the kewpie doll.

Malcolm whirled to face his nephew and said, rather fiercely, “Why couldn’t you have waited? Why’d it have to happen to you so damn soon?”

Dylan only blinked. “What are you talking about?”

“Your first writing contest,” Malcolm said under his breath, shaking his head. “First goddamn writing contest and you win the lottery. First fucking place on your first go. That’s gotta be some sorta goddamn record, hasn’t it? You know how long it took me to get published, before *anyone* gave two rips about what I wrote? Thirty-one! Thirty-one years old with a wife and one kid, another on the way, and only then do I hear the good news!”

He scoffed bitterly and ranted on, “That’s how it’s *supposed* to be. You sweat it out; you build up an immunity to crushing disappointment, you swallow all the rejections and the better-luck-next-times. You shove them all down your throat like so many hard-boiled eggs till you think your stomach can’t handle anymore. You start to question yourself, your abilities, your talents. Ask yourself if you’re cut out for it. Finally you get to a point where you can’t look at an advertisement for writing contests in a magazine without shuddering. And then – usually only *then* – does anything happen to you. Christ, you’re lucky if you get *that*.”

Dylan just keep looking at him, not even mad. “What are you saying, then?” he asked in that same soft, understanding voice. “Are you disappointed in me or what?”

“Of course not,” Malcolm said with another sigh, looking away from his nephew out at the maddeningly picturesque water. “I was just expecting you to be.” Malcolm gave a short little humorless laugh, just a soft noise in his throat, and he said, “What’s gonna happen to you after this? Probably keep writing, I’ll imagine. Maybe you’ll write novels next, nice big fat ones. Some of your stories may catch the eye of movie producers; they’ll want to hire you to consult on adaptations of your work, or maybe you’ll write screenplays for them. At this rate, you’ll make enough off sales to retire when you’re fifty, or maybe even earlier. Your autumn years will be nice and relaxing, you’ll get to enjoy every minute of your grandchildren, and you’ll be set by the time you spin off the mortal coil. Just keep writing, and you’ll never have to worry again. I mean, look, you’ve already gotten a boost.”

He shut his eyes again and waited for his nephew to get mad, to say something good and hurtful to him. Maybe they'd even fistfight and roll on the grass, that'd be a hell of a dramatic shift.

But Dylan only said, in a cool clear voice, "For your information, Uncle Malcolm, this *isn't* my first writing contest."

Malcolm opened his eyes and looked at his nephew. "It's not?"

Dylan shook his head. "It's my third. I know that's still lucky as hell, but I've still had rejection before this. You know, my creative writing professor didn't even dig it that much."

Malcolm's look softened. "Really?"

"He said it wasn't introspective enough, or something like that. Too run-of-the-mill, too much like a cheap action thriller. That's what he said to me, honest. First contest I entered, I made seventh place. My bar was set so low, I thought *that* was impressive. Second contest, I made fourth. Honestly, Uncle Malcolm, I had every reason to think I'd lose out on this one, too. This news...it was a complete wash. I guess it still hasn't sunk in, y'know?"

Malcolm had nothing to say. He just looked into his nephew's soft, friendly hazel eyes and felt horrible. Horrible, and every single known synonym for it. He couldn't believe he could be so furious at his nephew's success. But he knew exactly what Dylan meant: the complete wash of an unanticipated victory. He opened his mouth to say something, shut it just as quickly, and then stared back out at the water turning bloody with the red of the dying sun.

"Uncle Malcolm," Dylan said just above a whisper, "you wanna go home? These mosquitoes are starting to bother me, too."

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There were no does on the road to endanger the Mazda. There was nothing out there at all. The dark had only just set in when they arrived at Malcolm's house. Malcolm caught sight of a note from his ex dangling on the front screen door.

"Greta was here," he murmured to his nephew. "Wanted to know if I still had any of those old Navajo quilts."

"What does she want one of those for?" Dylan asked.

Malcolm shrugged tiredly. "She said they belonged to her originally. Heirlooms from her granddad, I guess. Hell, she can *have* them. I don't care."

Dylan nodded. "Could I come in?"

Malcolm nodded back with a yawn as he unlocked and pulled open the door. "No booby traps stopping you," he said.

When they were inside, safe and sheltered from the biting insects of the night, Malcolm invited his nephew to sprawl out on the sofa while he took the old armchair beside it. One of the aforementioned Navajo quilts was draped comfortingly over the back of the chair.

"Uncle Malcolm," Dylan said as he looked at the ceiling, "you meant all that stuff you said, right? Me retiring at fifty and all that?"

Malcolm pulled off his socks, thrust them to the floor, and gave another mighty yawn. "Perhaps," he replied. "I dunno, it could've been bullshit, too. Us writers are notorious for our bullshit."

"I don't think it was," Dylan said quietly.

"Never mind," Malcolm said. "You're not me. You shouldn't listen to me."

He didn't see Dylan smile, but he did hear his nephew say, "Too bad that I do."

Malcolm said nothing back. He, too, was enamored by the plain off-white ceiling.

“You mind if I crash here tonight, Uncle Malcolm?” Dylan asked softly. “Kinda too dark to take that road back home, y’know?”

Malcolm paused a full minute before saying, “Yes.”

He ended up falling asleep where he sat, right in the armchair. In his sleep he seized the Navajo quilt from the back of the chair and pulled it tightly over himself; this one, at least, would remain his.

Dylan, too, sleep where he lay on the sofa, and Malcolm wondered faintly if story ideas danced furiously around in his nephew’s head as they did in his own.

They slept well that night, and nothing disturbed them. Malcolm always liked ending his stories just like this, with the main characters slumbering restfully after a spot of action. In truth, he always liked writing endings, because he wasn’t afraid of his stories at that point. He always just seemed to know that he had ended them right where he wanted them.

But if he went on any further drawing out the ending, he knew he’d spoil it entirely.

