

Hobson's Choice

"Seriously, what do you want more? To get published, or get laid?" Dennis always had a way of boiling questions down to the essential.

I glanced up the bar. The college girls at the far end were not glancing back. "That's not such an easy question," I said "How many of one is worth one of the other? How much would you pay for one, or expect to be paid for the other? Could you brag about it, or years later want nobody to know? There are a lot of variables here."

Midway through the third beer was not the time for nuanced discernment, and limiting options was not the strength of the post-midnight literary guild. Our strength was jealousy. "Pete got another story accepted by Dark World," said Dennis. "Why him and not us?"

Groans echoed around the table. We agreed for the dozenth time that our former classmate Pete Moss had no talent, that his innocent little one-dimensional stories were lightweight pieces of fluff with no tension or conflict, and that our own complicated and sardonic attempts had at least equal merit. But he was getting published and we were not. The only rationale seemed to be some karmic justice for the name his parents had unwittingly inflicted on him.

Collecting unsigned rejection slips and slinging pizzas in the evenings after putting in an honest hour or two at the keyboard in mornings when we weren't too hung over was not part of the path we had imagined. Knock out some sharp stories

before age 25, get a six-figure advance on a novel, and the women would follow.

That was the plan.

“Pete’s not getting laid either,” said Dennis. “I heard he has an agent though. Not New York, some local guy.” We agreed all around that was just weak and swore we wouldn’t go that route. Our work was strong enough to stand on its own, we were breaking new ground and not restrained by the norms, and we didn’t need to grovel or play any political games to be recognized.

The next afternoon I was standing in an unlit hallway on the second floor of a strip mall two blocks from the state university campus, facing an unpainted office door with an index card reading “K.V. Hobson, Literary Agent” taped to it. This was Raleigh, not New York, and the tenants below were a gyro shop and a tattoo parlor. I pushed the door open and entered a dimly lit foyer that smelled of stale cigars. There was no receptionist, but in the back room a figure stirred. I called out, and hearing no response edged to the doorway and peered in. Sitting at a battered desk of thrift store vintage was a tall, angular man with a gleaming bald skull, a pointed goatee, and thick eyebrows that arched like carets over his bloodshot eyes. The desk and two side tables were overflowing with stapled manuscripts and unopened envelopes. On the top of the nearest stack I noticed a folder with a familiar scrawl on the cover. Dennis must have been here an hour earlier.

The gaunt man behind the desk motioned me forward with his right hand as he kept writing with his left. After a minute he pushed his papers aside and looked up. “Ah,” he said, “another aspiring artist ready to set the literary world on fire?”

I looked around but there was no empty chair. I managed to stammer out my name before he cut me off. Placing his fingertips on his temples, he closed his eyes and said, "Let me guess. Four years out of school now. Your high school teachers said you had some promise, you were bad at math, and retail sales was beneath you. So you took an English major and tried to impress a Kappa Gamma with poetry. Clever things like getting 'no pants' to rhyme with romance. Instead she banged half the swim team and now you have a sheaf of sad stories about a young man's search for elusive love?"

I felt my face burning and caught my breath. How could he have known about the Kappa Gamma? "No, no," I said, "my stories are very different from that."

"Let's see what you've got then," he said. He extended his hand toward the light switch on the wall and a fluorescent light flickered overhead. I was sure his hand never got within a yard of the switch. I handed over my own folder of typed pages and tried not to look too eager as I watched him.

"Do you mind if I smoke?" he said, not as a question. It was his office after all. He pulled a cigar from his desk drawer, clipped the tip with a finger guillotine, brushed some loose flakes of tobacco from the tip onto his lapel, and pulled on the stogie three times until the end glowed. I could have sworn I did not see him use a match or a lighter.

Hobson – I assume that was his name because he didn't bother to introduce himself – flipped through the folder in a blur, taking scarcely five seconds for each page that I had fretted an hour to pound out. "Yes, pretty dreadful," he muttered. "Wooden dialogue, stock characters, predictable endings." He glanced up. "The

deathbed musings of a disappointed 70-year-old man? You're what, 26? Didn't they tell you to write what you know?"

I felt myself shrinking as I stood in place. "It's 28. But my dad was 65 when he passed."

Hobson grunted and looked up and down at my Dominos shirt and torn sneakers. "I can understand the disappointment all right." He glanced back at the pages in his hand. "Now what do we have here? A talking dog story? I haven't seen one of these in how long – nearly two days now?" He looked back up. "Oh, don't be discouraged. Granted, this is pretty awful, but a lot of bad stuff gets published. It's just a matter of will. How much you're willing to sacrifice to succeed."

I wasn't in the mood for any more workshop pep talks about sticking with it and being patient and ignoring rejection. "Look, what are your fees?" I blurted. I had all of \$80 in my account to last me the next week and a half. "What percentage of royalties do you usually charge?"

Hobson set aside his cigar and laughed out loud, showing a set of yellow, pointed teeth. "There's no money in this game anymore. Not at your level anyhow. Two cents a word, two complimentary copies, and the right to brag to your friends is what you'll be paid if you're lucky. So think hard, what are you really after?"

I got about half a minute into the line I try telling girls, about wanting to be a writer and maybe down the road there'd be screenplays and a novel about the alienation of my generation, when Hobson laughed again.

"Come on, son. You don't want to be a writer. That's just a chore. What you want is to be a published author, noodling around the coffee shops in the morning

and going to parties in the evening. You want to see your picture on the dustcover of a book and have women come up to you and tell you how brilliant you are. The only question is whether your studio will be in southern France or Rome. Am I right?"

He had it completely, except that the studio would be overlooking Malibu. This was the regular theme of the midnight literary guild, and we refined those details far more than our halting attempts at prose. "All that would be nice," I allowed, "but really, what I truly am is a writer. Can you help make that possible?" I was hoping I sounded more convincing than I felt.

Hobson smiled to himself. "The spokesman for your generation, right? Maybe the voice of the New South? I have met a few of you already," he said, gesturing to the tables heaped with paper. "Okay son, here's the deal. My, ah, organization isn't quite a commercial venture. We don't promise money, nor do we ask for it. Our medium of exchange is – somewhat different.

I felt a chill at the thought this skeletal figure was about to produce a bottle and propose an embrace in return for his consideration. The conquests by the dean of the English department were so legendary that half the female graduate students were referred to as the harem.

I glanced toward the door, and Hobson laughed again. "Don't you worry. Your pitiful body has no attraction. The inner being has more value," he said. His bloodshot eyes looked even redder. "The question remains, do you have the will? What would you exchange to be able to pursue your goal?" He rose from his chair

and I was startled to see he was nearly seven feet tall. Then I realized his feet were several inches off the floor.

“Yes, you may be starting to understand the organization I represent. We deal in services and commodities and offer fair trades, to those who are agreeable.” He dropped back into his chair and resumed his cigar.

“You, you are. . .?” I couldn’t finish. “I’m not believing this. Is this some Faustian deal, I can trade my soul for some wishes?”

Hobson chuckled and tapped his cigar ash on the floor. “Hardly that. The regional managers in London and Berlin are the ones who deal in souls. And those have to be worthwhile. A bishop or a general, someone who can generate some real mayhem in exchange for a little empire. This is just a little retail office out in the boondocks. Here we offer smaller favors for smaller sacrifices. So for you – to become a published author, what would you give? A leg maybe, or deafness?”

I recoiled and shook my head. I wasn’t prepared for mutilation. “Isn’t there something a little less – drastic?”

“You have to give if you want to receive,” said Hobson. “Think of all the things you want. What would you be willing to forego, if it meant you could get something else?”

“I’m beginning to think you already know what we want without our saying it,” I said. “But what do you get from these – deals? Is this some sort of roundabout way of capturing souls?”

With that Hobson laughed again, louder than ever. “Your soul? Don’t you worry, we’ve got that locked up already. Ever since that time when you were a

sophomore – surely you remember *that*? No, we are just doing dime-store business here. It costs us nothing to grant you one of your little requests, and in return your frustration and bitterness at not having what you lack will spill out and promote our work with everyone you encounter.” Here his voice turned softer and confidential, like a salesman trying to close a deal. “But at least you will be getting something you truly desire, and not everyone can say that. And knowing how long you will be living – no, I can’t tell you – that should be some satisfaction. Now think carefully, what do you really want?”

My thoughts went back to the debate of the night before, and still the choice was confusing. “Hell,” I said, and caught myself. “No disrespect intended. I really don’t know. Either would be satisfying I suppose. Tell you what, I’ll let you choose. But whichever it is, it can’t be just once and that’s all – it would have to be regular. Either way I’ll be getting half a loaf, which is more than I’ve got going now.”

Hobson grinned and rubbed his hands together. “Excellent spirit. That’s the way – don’t back away from life, but plunge right ahead. More courage than your friends have.” He glanced over at the side table and Dennis’s folder burst into flames, leaving a layer of ashes, but somehow the papers underneath were untouched. “Go along now,” he said. “You will be getting a response one way or the other in a while, but be a little patient. You know how editors are.”

That was six weeks ago. Since then none of my self-addressed stamped envelopes has returned to my mailbox, and none of my dates has gotten beyond a first cup of coffee. Dennis has stopped coming to the literary guild. Last I heard he was studying real estate at night school.

Hobson told me to be patient, but then virtue wasn't his main line of business. Today I returned to the strip mall for a follow-up visit, only to discover there was no second floor above the gyro shop. This only confirmed my belief that our encounter was real. Now I will be content to wait. If you are reading this, please let me know, and I can cancel my online dating service.