

Hemingway's Curse

To say that Wane Redbrew was terrified would be an incomplete description of what he felt at that moment. Having been awakened by a violent thunderclap, he was now staring at the glowing specter of Ernest Hemingway's ghost, which was standing at the foot of his bed. He felt like he was about to wet himself but was fascinated at the same time. Typical to many such scenarios he had read about in fiction, words escaped him. So he waited, mouth open, not daring to breathe or incapable of it – he didn't know which – waiting to see what the apparition would say or do.

“Wane Redbrew?”

The question hung in the air like an open grave. Dumbfounded, he continued to stare at the specter. Finally, his lungs began to function, and he drew in a much-needed breath. Hemingway stared at him as if he was waiting for a reply.

“Are you Wane Redbrew?” he asked for the second time with some irritation, raising a hairy eyebrow in Wane's direction.

The thought flickered through his mind that it might be prudent to lie. He decided against it. After all, didn't ghosts have omniscience or something? As he was about to speak, he saw a massive lightning bolt stream across the sky, followed by a thunderclap that made his teeth rattle.

“Alright, alright!” Hemingway shouted as he turned towards the window, apparently conversing with nature. “I just wasn't sure it was him! Keep your shirt on!”

Turning back to Wane, he continued.

Hemingway's Curse

"Wane Redbrew, it has come to the attention of the muse of all writers that you have, for the past forty-seven weeks, attended the First Draft writers group. And in that time, you have only presented five completed drafts of your work."

Hemingway paused as if expecting a response. Wane finally found his tongue.

"Uhh... yeah??" *Brilliant*, Wane thought to himself. *You meet the ghost of possibly the most famous American writer of all time, and your first words to him are, "Uhh... yeah?" Really?*

"Wane Redbrew, it has been decided by the Muse of all writers that you have not honored her..."

Lightning and another loud thunderclap interrupted his delivery.

"Okay! I'm sorry! That you have not honored HIM," he said, facing the window. Then, turning back to Wayne, he said in a whisper, "She's been identifying as a male ever since she finished the last season of *Transparent* on Amazon Prime." He then continued in a normal voice. "And since you have not honored *him*, you must be taught a lesson. You must complete thirty stories in the next thirty days and present at least four completed works to your writers group in person in that time, or you will never again be able to... or you will never again be able to..."

The spirit screwed up his face as if he'd just bitten down on a slice of lemon. Then, instead of completing his sentence, he paused and walked up to Wane's bedside, leaned over, and whispered in Wane's ear.

Wane's eyes grew wide, and his mouth dropped open once more.

"No! You can't be serious!"

Hemingway's Curse

Hemingway made his way back to his former station at the foot of the bed. Looking slightly embarrassed and with a pitying look, he replied. "I'm afraid so."

"But... but..." Wane stammered, "That's not fair. I mean, how am I going to.... I don't even get a warning or something first?"

Hemingway looked towards the window and appeared about to say something when a thunderclap rattled the window. He turned back to Wane, lowering his head somberly and shaking it from side to side.

"What time? Is it midnight on... on what day, exactly?"

"As a reminder of your deadline, you will have an image on your right forearm that will show you how much time you have left. Thirty completed stories in thirty days, with four presented to your writers group, or else you will suffer the consequences."

Wane looked down at his right forearm and saw a tattoo of what appeared to be a timer of sorts. The numbers were changing even as he looked at them, counting down to the appointed hour. He stared back at the apparition.

"Please! You can't possibly..."

"Yes, she –"

THUNDERCLAP!

" – He can!"

The next second, the ghost was gone, and Wane was left, staring into the darkness.

Hemingway's Curse

* * * * *

The next morning Wane woke up, got out of bed, and went to brush his teeth as usual. The memory of his strange dream was still rumbling around in his head. It wasn't until he looked down to put the toothpaste on his brush that he saw the tattoo on his right forearm. He dropped his toothbrush into the sink and stared at the clock for fifteen seconds – a fact which he knew because, as each second passed, the time on the tattoo-clock changed.

He started to hyperventilate. Running over and opening a window, he took in several deep breaths of the chilly morning air.

So, it was real, he thought.

His mind raced as his lungs calmed down, and his breathing steadied. Then, without bothering to close the window, he went into the bedroom and grabbed his laptop.

Several hours and three cups of coffee later, Wane had finished banging out an ending to the short story he had begun reading the previous week in the First Draft writers group. He looked at the clock on the laptop. *Only four hours until the meeting,* he thought. He hit the print button. There was no way he was relying on his computer alone. What if the power went out and his battery failed? Then he couldn't finish the reading, and there were only three more meetings until his deadline.

Hemingway's Curse

He rushed downstairs and grabbed the printout off the networked printer that he shared with his two housemates. Taking it back up to his room and putting it in his writer's satchel, he immediately sat down to begin work on the next story.

* * * * *

"Well, I can't believe it," Lee exclaimed when Wane finished reading, "we finally got to hear the end to one of your stories. And it was pretty good, too!"

"I especially liked the part where the gnome chewed the head off the magic gummy-bear," Christine said.

A few other people made comments or suggested changes, but all-in-all the story had been well-liked by the group. Wane found it hard to enjoy. All he could think about was finishing the thirty stories in time. He smiled weakly, nodded, and rubbed his right forearm absentmindedly. He'd worn a long shirt to cover up the tattoo so he wouldn't be thinking about it constantly and others wouldn't ask questions, but it felt like it was itching underneath, calling out to him, urging him to complete his appointed task.

It was all he could do to sit through the remaining readers. He did manage to give Lee a suggestion to drop the unnecessary attributions in the dialogue he had read, but nothing else. As soon as the meeting adjourned, he gathered his things and began hurrying to his car.

"Hey, Wane!" Bob called out from behind him.

Hemingway's Curse

Wane turned around as Bob jogged up to him.

"Hey, great story today."

"Thanks."

"Are you feeling okay?"

By this time, Lee and Clark, who had parked in the same area as Wane, had caught up with them and were within earshot. Wane looked at them nervously, not wanting to create any additional delay.

"I'm fine – really."

"You looked like you were sweating in there when you were reading. Are you sure you're feeling okay?"

The tattoo on his arm felt like it was on fire. He started rubbing it aggressively.

"It's nothing."

He was so distracted; he hadn't realized he'd rolled up his right shirt-sleeve while he was speaking.

"What the heck is that?" Lee asked, pointing at the tattoo.

"Hey, did that tattoo just change while I was looking at it?" Bob asked.

"No, it's nothing. It's –"

"It did change! I saw it, too!" Clark said.

Wane felt embarrassed. He wanted a giant hole to open and swallow him up into the bowels of the earth.

"Dude, what gives?" Bob asked.

Hemingway's Curse

Wane let out a sigh. He reluctantly told them the whole story about the encounter with Hemingway's ghost and the gender-confused muse, omitting the specifics about the curse – it was just too embarrassing. When he finished, Bob turned and stared at Lee, who looked like *he* had just seen a ghost himself.

"Whoa. I can't believe it," Lee said.

"Yeah, it's pretty bizarre, I know, but it *really* happened, and I'm *really* scared."

"No, I don't think that's what he means," Bob replied. He looked at Lee again.

"I think you better tell him, Lee."

"You don't think it's actually possible that –"

"Look at the tattoo on his arm!" Bob exclaimed, pulling a bit too hard on Wane's wrist as he tugged in Lee's direction.

"Ow! What are you talking about?" Wane asked.

"Okay, well, it just *might* be possible that I had something to do with this," Lee said, wincing.

"What?" Wane asked in surprise.

"Well, after the meeting last week, Bob and I went out for lunch. We tried some new Chinese place over on Elm. Anyway, I had three or four beers with lunch and –"

"Just tell him about the fortune cookie," Bob interrupted.

"Yeah, tell us about the fortune cookie, Lee," Clark chimed in.

"So I opened the fortune cookie, and it said, 'the next wish you make will come true.'"

Hemingway's Curse

"I told him he should wish for a billion dollars," Bob said. "I bet you wish you'd listened to me now."

"What did you wish for, Lee?" Wane asked through gritted teeth.

"I kind've wished that the writing muse would put a curse on you so that you had to finish thirty stories in thirty days and present four of them at the meeting or else..."

"Or else, what?" Wane asked.

"Well..." Lee said, staring at the ground.

"Either you tell him or I will," Bob prodded.

Lee continued to stare at the ground as he spoke.

"Or else you'd never again be able to _____," he finally blurted out.

As Lee spoke, Wane felt his ears beginning to burn as a wave of anger pushed its way up his neck.

"This is your fault!" he said, lunging at Lee, arms outstretched to choke him. Lee stepped back quickly, and Clark put an arm across Wane's chest to restrain him.

"Hold on!" Clark said, pushing Wane back.

"Is that what the ghost told you, too?" Bob asked, looking at Wane.

"Yes! And now I've got to finish thirty stories in thirty days, or I'm done for! And I don't know if I can do it!"

Wane began pacing back and forth, temporarily forgetting the urge to choke the life out of Lee.

Hemingway's Curse

"I mean, I get writer's block, or I think of a new story I want to write, and I lose interest, or – I just don't know if I can do it!"

"What if we could reverse the curse?"

Everyone looked at Lee.

"You mean, like, go to the restaurant and get another fortune cookie and undo the curse?" Bob asked.

"Yeah. That's exactly what I mean."

"Well, what are we waiting around here for? Let's go," Clark said.

* * * * *

Ten minutes later, they all stood staring at the storefront of a Chinese restaurant, bewildered.

"Stop jerking me around, guys. This is serious," Wane said as he turned around to walk back to the car. "Can we go back to the library so I can get my car and go home? I've got some stories I need to write."

"If this was your idea of a joke, it's not funny," Clark said, turning to go with Wane.

"But it's not a joke, we really ate here just last week," Bob said in their defense.

Lee was still staring at the storefront, shaking his head. He looked at the dust-covered booth where he and Bob had eaten the week before and then at the sign

Hemingway's Curse

indicating the store had closed. From the state of the furniture and the thick layer of dust, it appeared as if no one had been inside in years, possibly decades.

"This just doesn't make any sense," he said as he turned and slowly walked back to his car.

Once everyone had strapped in, Lee turned back to look at Wane.

"Look, I feel bad for getting you into this, but I'm telling you the truth about the whole fortune cookie thing. And I want to help. What if we helped you write the stories?"

"That won't work. I can't risk it. I'm pretty sure the whole point is that I have to write them myself."

"That's not what I mean," Lee continued. "Look, you've started plenty of stories over the past few years that you've shared in the group. What if we helped you with ideas about how to complete those stories?"

"Yeah," Bob said. "That might work. That'd cut the time in half that it'd take you to write new ones."

"More than in half," Clark said. "If you don't have to think up completely new stories, that'd save a ton of time."

Wane's brow furrowed as he considered the possibility.

"That might work," he finally said.

"That settles it," Lee said, hitting the steering wheel with his hand. "My house. Tomorrow – 10 a.m. Writer's boot-camp!"

"I'll bring the beer!" Bob said.

Hemingway's Curse

"You in, Clark?" Lee asked.

"Oh, yeah. I wouldn't miss this."

"What'a ya say, Wane?" Lee asked.

"Yes. And thanks, you guys.... 10 a.m. it is. Just text me your address, and I'll be there."

* * * * *

The next morning the group met up as planned at Lee's house. Wane had managed to get a decent night's sleep the night before, now that he at least had a game plan for accomplishing his assigned task and lifting the curse. He managed to identify twenty old writing projects that he had started from the past few years that he thought would be good candidates. They began by reading one of the unfinished stories out loud to the whole group. Then Wane would pitch a possible ending. If he got stuck, they'd start tossing around different ideas until they hit on one that Wane thought he could write. What followed would consist of Wane writing the ending, while everyone else read through the next batch of uncompleted stories. By 4 p.m., Wane had completed four stories and was starting on the fifth.

Over the next few weeks, and with the help of his friends at the writing boot camp, Wane was able to complete all the required stories. On the last Saturday of his allotted thirty days—one day before his deadline, Wane arrived at the library early, story in hand. When it was his turn to present his work, Lee, Bob, and Clark were all

Hemingway's Curse

waiting in anticipation. Bob leaned over to Clark and whispered, "Are we sure this will work? I mean, the writer's muse can be a fickle entity."

"We're about to find out," replied Clark as Wane began to read.

"About a month ago, I woke up in the middle of the night to find the ghost of Ernest Hemingway standing at the foot of my bed...."

When Wane finished the last word of the story, Bob, Clark, and Lee began clapping. As they were clapping, the lights started to flicker and then went out entirely.

Denise – the meeting's moderator – spoke up.

"Don't panic, everyone. It's probably just a blown breaker or something. As soon as I can turn on my phone's flashlight, I'll go check. Everyone, just keep your seats, please."

Then, a glowing ball appeared in the middle of the group. Wane froze, too terrified to move. He wondered if he had committed some mortal sin by writing the true story of his experience and was about to be turned into a toad or something. An image materialized in the ether. It was Hemingway's ghost.

"Wane Redbrew, you have fulfilled your assigned task given to you by the writer's muse. You are hereby released from the curse. However, as a reminder of your offense, and so that you will never repeat your transgression, you will retain the tattoo of the clock, recording the exact time that you completed your task."

Hemingway stepped forward and put his hand on Wane's shoulder, leaning down as he looked into Wane's eyes.

Hemingway's Curse

"I especially liked the story about the crazy mutant cow who took over the supermarket and forced everyone to live as vegetarians for a month. The funeral scene where he made them eulogize all the cows they had murdered for their meat was priceless."

"Uhh... thanks." Wane replied.

"Oh, and one more thing," Hemingway continued as he stood up. "In the future, when addressing the writer's muse, be sure and use the feminine pronoun. She thinks urinals are disgusting, so she switched back."

The next second, the spirit was gone, and the lights were back on.

"Well, that didn't last long," Denise said.

Wane, Lee, Bob, and Clark all stared at each other.

"So, who wants to be the first to comment on Wane's very creative story?" she continued.

As the group proceeded to critique Wane's story, it became apparent from the exchange of knowing glances that no one besides the four friends had witnessed the visitation. After the meeting, the four went to the closest bar and discussed the whole episode over several rounds of beer. And until his dying day, Wane Redbrew never again presented an unfinished story to the First Draft writers group.