The Writer

Sidney sat at his desk and looked out into the ocean. The early morning sun, low on the horizon, shot yellow rays at the tops of the crumbly breakers and splashed larger panes of moving light onto the spaces between the swells. He had written only a few sentences in the last week. Whole hours seemed to pass while he sat looking at the sea. Sometimes it was the view; sometimes it was the desk. Grace had talked him into buying it, “a mature desk for a great writer,” she said. Seven thousand dollars, maple. Sidney liked the man who built it, Bert, a woodworker from Suffolk, white bushy mustache and huge meaty hands. “A hundred coats of varnish, Sidney,” he said as he wiped the desk with a rag for the last time.

Sidney caught himself some days staring at the variegated swirls of honey and amber, frozen beneath the layers of varnish or sometimes sliding his fingers over the smooth surface, imagining touching the texture of the wood underneath.

She shooed him out of the back door that day, feigning exhaustion, pointing to a pile of his father’s dress shirts she needed to iron.

This was the only sentence he had written since 6:45. It was now 10:30. He had had his coffee, a grapefruit, stretched on the rug trying to relieve the knots and stiffness that had plagued him since he had turned 50 three years ago. It was the very crude beginning of a story he had been thinking about for years, a boy going into the woods, something happening there, something dark. Sidney worked this way, sensing the edges of stories, going back to them in his daydreams, trying to flesh them out. This way when he sat down to write he had a window in. But this window was tiny and cloudy and he couldn’t see much through the glass.

Since the first novel and his success, a solid book tour and some decent royalties, Sidney had gone into a black hole of wordlessness. And, of course, Grace had left him. She was too young, too pretty to stay with a much older man, a one-hit wonder maybe. Thank god he hadn't married her or agreed to the children she wanted.

"You're selfish, Sidney. You can't hide from me for days, wringing your hands over a fucking story, and then want me to bow down to you when you have a minute for me, or when you want to escape with a quick fuck. That's not enough!" she said this as she pulled dresses from the bedroom closet.

He sat on the bed and watched her, her calves pumping as she screamed and packed. He would miss her legs and walking on the beach with her.

"You're right . . . I am a shit, you deserve better." She stopped and looked at him, her anger suddenly gone.

She took a deep breath, "See, Sidney, I love you, and I know you don't put much faith in that, but I do. And you don't love me, right?"

He looked down at the carpet, at his long crooked toes.

"I know."

She looked at him now like he was a child, one who had done something bad but would be forgiven. "I don't even think it's your fault. Maybe you aren't made for it."

She moved, reached out for his cheek, her right index finger reaching for his eyebrow, tracing it to the wrinkles near his eyes. He pulled her closer, his ear to her flat belly. "I'm sorry."

He listened to sounds from her stomach. She pushed him away, back in her irritation. "Just write something, Sidney; let Nathan decide if it's any good. Stop staring out of the window."

She grabbed her bag. "I'll come back later for the rest of the stuff. I have an apartment ready."

This had been planned, he understood now. And he wasn't mad at Grace; he knew he had cut her off these last months, blocking out everything but the sliver of the story he wanted to write. He knew too that he would never marry again, and so her leaving was fairplay. He really did want the best for her. He had stopped to wonder several times since she'd gone, would he be jealous, seeing her with another man, married maybe, a kid in a stroller? The answer was no.

He read the sentence aloud and sank when he could hear nothing but empty words.

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A day later Sidney sat in a bar at a small, square table near the window that faced the sidewalk. The blinds were down and saved him from a summer sun that seemed brighter at the beach. This place was a hold-out from older days, cheap tables and chairs, and a scratched and splintery water-stained bar. You couldn't smoke now, but the yellow-brown smears of nicotine still coated the walls, and the smell still hovered in the air and pulled Sidney back into a time when he and nearly all his friends smoked.

He sipped from a tall, ice-filled glass of well-bourbon and tried to write a few sentences. He tried to see the boy in the story, freckles, brown hair, slight, wiry frame, the dirty, well-worn sneakers. He could see the wild bushes that grew at the end of the backyard, where the lawn ended and the woods began.

He looked back at the back door, his mother still standing there, "Go on, go on," she mouthed at him, smiling.

Sidney looked up from his notebook, watching the bartender wash glasses in a hidden sink behind the bar. He imagined the water on the man's hands, and the simple pleasure of a simple task. He studied the man's head, grey thick hair though broken up by a tanned, pancaked-sized bald spot. The bartender hadn't brushed his hair over from the sides or the front. Sidney admired his lack of vanity.

Write. Write. He told himself, even if it's shit. "Just sit your ass down and write", an old professor, Bagwell, had yelled one day at the class. Someone had asked the pipe-smoking poet what kind of chair and desk he used to write in, "fuck the desk and the chair and the light and the perfect record that's playing in the other room, fuck it all except the words." Good advice Sidney thought and he had used it too, especially in that magic year, with Regina, newly married, in the tiny apartment on Hanover Street. He had pushed a shitty old card table in front of a hall window, not even a real room. But it didn't matter, because the words came like avalanches, almost every day, and he would jump out of bed, before he had to teach, the excitement and energy of his first novel waking him up before the light pushed through their curtainless windows and shone on his very asleep and soon to be pregnant wife.

He was 28, married, employed and his first novel was being published. His son, Louie, born and healthy. Sidney sat in the bar and allowed himself the buzz of that golden time, so many years ago. He was in a hole now, and he knew it. His last novel barely sold five thousand copies, and Nathan was about to dump him. "Give me something, Sidney; I can work with anything, essay, short story, excerpt. But smoke and mirrors, I can't do. Words buddy." Now womanless, long divorced from Regina who was happily remarried to Earl, an independently wealthy man, who doted on Regina and Louie and was boring and selfless and exactly what Regina wanted. Louie in DC ruling the world in some fat-cat banking office. He had called a week ago.

"You okay, Pops, I mean since Grace left?"

"Yep, just trying to write. It's very quiet in this house." There was silence on his son's end. He didn't want Louie to feel sorry for him.

"Hey, I got a promotion. Gonna head up my own team, run a big fund for the company."

"Congratulations. I am glad someone is making money in this family." Louie laughed.

"You need a loan, Pops?" Louie joked.

"Nope. But do you want to buy a beach house? And an over-priced BMW?"

"No, but maybe soon. Gotta go, Pops."

"Bye." Sidney held the cell phone, warm in his hand, and said a half-hearted thank you to a god he occasionally believed in, a thank you that Louie seemed healthy and happy despite his parents' divorce and having a father who at times lost sight of his family in pursuit of words on paper.

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The boy pushed apart the holly trees that lined the back edge of the yard and lumbered into the forest of scrub pines that spread into the uninhabited acres, all the way to the Franklin turnpike, a two-lane road on the east end of Beaverdam. He walked on pine needles, bored and alone, almost wishing for school on this free Saturday.

Sidney could see the forest, the slender, spindly pines; he closed his eyes, trying to block out the hum of the bar tv and the metal squeaks and coughs of the cars outside. He thought he could hear the soft clicking of pine needles as a foot pushed down on them, and the wind higher up blowing the limbs back and forth.

The boy picked up a branch from under one of the bigger pines; he stripped the thinner branches from the leader and left himself a fine walking stick. He whacked the trunk of the tree with it and it held firm. He was satisfied now with the little gift of a good stick.

Sidney had been an only child, his mother losing several pregnancies after he was born, so his father made her stop trying, afraid he would lose her in the struggle for another child. They were hardworking folks, his father a builder who had built many of the homes in their neighborhood, a careful man who took his time.. He seemed to care more about the finished house and happy clients than getting rich. Fair prices, great houses seemed to be his mission. Because of this, his father and his crews were always in demand.

His father would put Sidney to work on days he wasn't in school. His father paid him a penny for every nail he could find on building sites. So Sidney would bound off with an old coffee can, into the corners of framed but wall-less houses, the sides of poured slabs, in the gravelly, unfinished driveways where the crews parked and leaned against their trucks, drinking coffee, smoking cigarettes. Sidney loved the challenge, 100 nails, a goal he always set for himself.

Usually after an hour or two, searching for the flickers of shiny metal, also looking for snakes and the big rhinoceros beetles that seem to come out when the weather was warmer, he had enough to make the can heavy in his hand.

"Give you a buck for those," his father would say, smiling down at him.

"I'm not sure there's a hundred, Dad."

"Close enough. Plus you might have saved us a flat tire, you know. 20 bucks for a flat, Sid," his father would say, pulling a dollar bill from his cracked leather wallet.

His father had been dead ten years, his mother in a retirement home on the edge of town. Sidney went to see her on Sundays, bringing the paper and two cups of drinkable coffee.

Sidney tried to go back into his eight-year old mind: What was he scared of then? Could he work fear into the story? He had a sense that the story wanted darkness. He remembered movies, Tarzan captured by natives, tied up with Jane, sure to be fed to crocodiles or boiled in a giant stew pot. Or King Kong, he'd seen a version, the Jessica Lange one, Kong, a close up, teeth, the cavernous throat, looking for someone to crush. In the movie he remembers the easy effort of the monster destroying things, stepping on fleeing victims. The dark, too. He hated when his mom asked him to take the trash out to metal cans behind the house. Even with a flashlight, he worried about the racoon that had jumped out of the can at his father one night. His father had laughed about it, but Sidney remembered the terror of shining the flashlight out into the shadowy night, circling the area with light rays that didn't seem strong enough to let him see clearly what lurked by the shadowy cans. How relieved he was each time he tossed

the bag into the can and scurried quickly to the open back door. Safe within the house, Sidney felt he had always dodged death and was a little more grown up.

That's what he wanted in the story: to catch the boy in between childhood and something more mature and dark and serious, the feeling something bigger, more adult.

He walked through the pines, his stick in-hand, sucking in deep breaths of the cool air, trying to spit on rocks, stabbing crackling leaves. When he came to the creek, he stopped for a minute, to push over the bigger rocks, ones that usually held crayfish. He found a few babies, and one as big as his top two pinkie knuckles, but none that would let him feel he found a treasure. Once he found a giant crayfish, up the creek a bit, under a rotting log. It was as big as his foot. It looked so alien there, as the swirl of rotting leaf debris floated away and left the thing crawling in the sand, slowly, like some prehistoric monster.

The boy walked down the stream, jumping on bigger rocks, caring only a little if the creek water leaked into his sneakers. He spotted a rusting, dimpled can, Lone Star, the faded paint spelled out. His parents didn't drink, kept no beer in the house. The boy sometimes wondered about this secret drinking world. He'd seen his friends' fathers drink, after mowing lawns, watching the boy and the father's kids throw the football. He had seen his father's building crew drink on Fridays, after the work day. His father always brought beer to the men, cold, in a red igloo cooler, the one that they took on day-trips to the beach.

He sat back from his pad, knowing what he'd done before he read it. Sidney had put himself, his father, the red igloo cooler into the story. Not a sin, but where was this headed? He reread it. Sidney liked the description, the journey into the woods. He could see the crayfish, the ones from his own childhood creek. He looked up at the bartender, now watching the tv, his arms folded, his drying towel hanging from his right fist, up his wrist, the raised keloid of a burn on his forearm.

He left the bar. He couldn't write anymore, but he felt he had something though, the sliver of a lead, and the feeling that there was more. He was tired of reaching back in for the story, but he was happy it was there.

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He returned to the bar the next day and sat in the same seat, same table, ordered the same cheap bourbon, and waited for the words to come. He looked for the old bartender, but a woman with a long gray ponytail was pouring beers and tapping a package of cigarettes on the counter, waiting for her next smoke break. And nothing came. He waited, an hour maybe, watching customers, looking at the empty lines of his notebook. Sidney finished his watery bourbon and left.

That night he raised the door on the second bay of the garage. Beside the BMW that he couldn't really afford now was his father's old truck. When his father died, Sydney's mother asked him to sell it or donate it. So Sydney parked it in the garage a few weeks after the funeral and never got around dealing with it. Occasionally, like tonight, he would raise the garage door and pull it out into the driveway, letting it idle, charging the battery. The truck was still as his father had left it, clean, vacuumed, paperwork on every repair in the glove box. His father's smell, too, lingered there, English Leather aftershave, Big Red chewing gum. The change in the ashtray he never used was all quarters.

Sydney wasn't overly sentimental, but he liked keeping the truck, and the memories of riding around with his father, to job sites, to the river to look at the falls, to pick up a pizza when his mom needed a break from cooking, were pleasant ones. They did not make him especially sad, and he felt a little guilty about that. He loved his father as a child, as a teenager, but when he left home to go to college, he never really spent more than a day or two with his parents. He wondered if it was like that for most. You came back home, you replayed good and maybe bad memories, you noticed your parents aging, the repeated stories, the slower movement up the stairs. You shared your wife with them, your kids, you

talked about mortgages and life insurance, the weather, but you never regained that intimacy, of when you were small, when your mom rubbed the growing pains out of your ankles, the ones that had woken you up a few hours after falling asleep, or when your dad showed you how to hammer a nail, his hand holding your hand, him lifting the tool with you but letting you feel the weight as it fell to earth again and again.

So on this night he sat in the truck and tried to write. And words came.

After ten minutes of looking for another can, the boy moved out of the creek, and toward the parkway. His parents had warned him before to stay reasonably close to the house; the creek was "plenty far" his dad had said, but the parkway was dangerous, the speeding cars, "hobos" his father had said, hitchhiking, asking for money. The boy could hear the cars' low buzz and rumble in the distance, and he walked toward the noise. He noticed as he walked the bits of road trash that must have floated over the cement embankment; faded strips of plastic bags, bottle caps now dotted the ground under the scrub pines and oaks. It wasn't as pretty here, not like the thick forest he had just walked through. The sun seemed stronger and the boy found himself sweating. Maybe he would go back and soak his feet in the creek water. Maybe his mom would be free to play some cards in the cool living room air.

Sidney liked the pause in the story here, the boy momentarily frozen, danger perhaps lurking in his next choice.

That evening after a walk on the beach and sandwich, he grabbed his notebook and headed back to the truck. His neighbor, Mr. Dean, was shuffling past with his old black Lab, Moonie.

"Hey, Sidney." The old man stopped and looked at the truck. "Nice to see the Ford out."

"Yeah, might take it for a spin." Sidney didn't want to explain to the old man that he was using his dead father's truck as his muse.

"Haven't seen Grace in a while." The old man perked up whenever he saw Grace in the driveway and would always shuffle over with Moonie, while she sweet-talked the old dog and flirted harmlessly with Mr. Dean.

“She’s long gone, Mr. Dean.” The old man frowned and scratched at his cheek.

“Hmm, sure liked her,” he said.

“Yep, me too.” Sidney said it nicely, trying to comfort the old man. But it didn’t work, and Mr Dean shuffled off sullenly, “Night, Sidney.”

Back in the truck, he rolled down the windows and picked up his notebook.

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But the hum of the cars seemed to call him, and he imagined it might be fun to peek over the embankment at the speeding traffic. So he kept walking, into the bright light. The boy thought he smelled smoke and the hint of meat, bacon maybe.

There was a big spreading oak maybe fifty paces in front of him and some thick green brush to the right of it.

“Boy.” He heard the voice before he saw the man, who, he could now see, was shirtless, sitting at the base of the oak tree, a little fire crackling in front of him. He was holding a stick, roasting a hot dog. The man didn’t look at him, just stared into the fire. His brown skin was slick with the heat of the fire and from the sun that shone through skinny trees grown near the road.

The boy stepped closer, looking at the man, wondering if he could run fast enough to get away. The man didn’t move, just held the stick that held the meat.

“Boy, you got a cigarette?”

“No sir.”

Smoke circled the old man, but through a few swirling pockets of air, the boy could see that his slick brown arms were dotted with slightly raised circles, maybe scars, that seemed to catch a little of the sun. His feet were bare, but the boy could see the man’s weathered, muddy work boots beside him.

“I see you looking at my burns. Asphalt, movin tar. Up and down 64. Some years 95.”

Still the man didn't look at the boy but just stared at the crackling fire. He pulled the stick closer and blew on the meat and then pulled it off. The boy looked down at his feet, wondering if he should run for it, the man's meal felt too personal to witness.

"You seen Junior?" The man asked, finally looking up, holding the meat like the boy might steal it from him.

"No sir."

"Ain't seen him for a while. They say he got a new wheelchair, moves by itself. You think he could hold a fishing rod?"

"Maybe."

The man turned back to the fire, returned to the last bites of his hot dog. The boy knew he should leave; it felt dangerous here with this shirtless black man, but he couldn't move.

"Come here, boy." And the boy knew he shouldn't, but the man's voice was like nothing he ever heard before, soft candy, low murmurs. He stepped forward.

"Give me your hand boy." The man's hand was sand-paper rough, warm, sweaty. The man didn't grip tight, the boy could have pulled away. The man closed his eyes, and his fingers closed a little, and he took a deep breath. The boy did not hear him cry, but saw tears drip down his face. The man took another deep breath, and squeezed the boy's hand, like his mother did when they said prayers at night.

The man released the boy's hand, and lowered his head, the tears still dripping, now dotting his work pants. His head seemed to be shaking, a silent sob, maybe a tremor caused by something dark and deep that the boy couldn't understand.

"Go, boy, tell Junior I'm coming, take him fishing."

The boy turned, said nothing, and began to jog away from the man, the fire, the embankment and cars. He never looked back. When he reached the creek, his chest began to flutter with guilt. Surely the

boy had done something bad, his parents would know he had gone to the parkway, shared some strange prayer with a half-naked crazy man. He could have been killed, knocked over the head his mom would say. Gotta be smart his father would say, softly but disappointed.

When he saw the chimney of the house, he slowed, wiped his sweaty hands on his jeans and stepped into the backyard.

Sidney put his pen down and twisted back and forth in his father's truck, trying to stretch the muscles he hadn't moved in two hours. He was nearing the end, and Sidney could see the final scene. It had been years since he had written like this, sentences, paragraphs coming without clouds, without tension. The light from the setting sun was nearly gone, so he flipped the small dome light of the truck on, one that his father had used to read maps when he and Sidney would drive at night, after dinner, looking for new land that clients might want to build on.

Three days later the boy and his father were driving to the store. The boy sat quietly, watching the side of the road, trees blurring green, gravel and asphalt, a gray black stream, barely flowing.

"Found a body, down by the embankment. Old guy, just dead, by an old stump. Not hurt, they said. Just dead. Sad huh?"

The boy said nothing and tried to focus on the trees again and the road, but there in the blurred colors, out of his windows, were his eyes, and the tears, and his slick chest, and the boy could feel his rough hands again, and hear his voice, "Junior" and the boy began to cry out loud, and shake.

"Son? Son?" His father said, his voice filled with confusion and care.

"What's wrong?" His father pulled over onto the shoulder, the truck turned slightly towards the trees and brush, maybe 20 yards off the road. He turned the engine off and clutched the boy's knee.

The boy turned without looking, rubbing his burning watery eyes into his father's denim work shirt.

"I did nothing. I did nothing. I did nothing." He whispered, not sure if his father could hear him. "I'm sorry" he said to the man still floating in his memory. "I'm sorry, Junior."

As cars rolled by and trucks rattled the pavement up on the road, the boy and his father sat in the truck, the boy still crying into his father's chest, his father quiet and still, saying nothing, but watching the pines near the front of the truck, moving together in the wind, a family of trees maybe, just watching the strange scene in front of them.