

A Picture's Worth a Thousand Words

I

It was an odd illusion: the desk staring at him, through him, the desk talking to him.

“So you came here, knowing nothing, and you want me to teach you to write.”

“Ah, yes sir.” Maybe he shouldn't have hesitated, maybe he should have been more definitive. Too late now. The desk was moving on.

“You've never written anything before? Ever?”

“No sir.” He didn't hesitate this time, but the desk still frowned. Hard to please.

“Then before we start I should tell you something.” He looked up because he knew that tone of voice, that world weary, why me, just why, voice. They always wanted you to look in their eyes when they used that tone, even if it was that tone that made you want to look away so bad, made you feel like a bother and a burden and a nuisance.

“Like they say, everyone can write. Anyone can pick up a pen and scribble notes on a page. But not everyone can *write*.” He heard the funny accent, the stress on that last write, and he knew what it meant. It meant he wasn't going to be able to do it. “We're going to find out if you can do it.

“Okay, the first step to writing is caring. They say the first step to writing is to write what you know. That's not what they mean. Stephen Crane wrote the Red Badge of Courage, one of the best books about the experiences of war, but he never fought in a war. You don't have to know. You have to care. You have to pour all your caring into your writing, and then you can write.

“But don't get me wrong, because most people do.” The desk—the man—wanted a laugh, but he couldn't manage it. This wasn't the time for a laugh, this was serious. “You have to know *something*. Like if you want to write about the plight of the black woman, well, it helps if you're a plighted black woman.” The desk eyed him, certainly not a black woman. “But just because you aren't doesn't mean you can't. Just means you have to do a nasty bit of research. You might want to speak to a plighted black woman.”

Finally, he thought of something to say. “I don't want to write about the plight of the black woman.”

“Well, that’s a good start. A very good start. Alright then, what do you care about?”

II

He sat on the edge of the fountain, and he thought. He thought really hard, but he couldn’t seem to think of anything. Certainly he cared about something. Everyone cared about something. Only what did he care about? He watched the parade of furniture walk by, ignoring him. There were lots of chairs and tables, but he was in a city, so that was to be expected. Here and there was a candlestick or an ottoman, carefully aloof. A couple of end tables and coffee tables were scattered about in little groups, sitting over coffee in cafes, chatting, chatting, chatting. They were all people, of course, tables don’t talk, chairs don’t walk, ottomans and candlesticks don’t wander about, lonely and confused. He had been taught this since he was little, since he was reading his furniture books, learning all the different names. But he couldn’t help how he saw people, as all pieces of furniture wandering around. He couldn’t help how he perceived people.

A tall floor lamp walked by, and he saw how it was slender and silver and bright at the top, bright like a clever girl. He loved to watch the floor lamps stroll by, but there wasn’t one for him. He had tried once or twice, but he always flubbed, couldn’t flirt. Girls didn’t like being compared to lamps, even if he told them all about how gorgeous the lamps were, just like them. They yelled at him, called him names for calling them furniture. “I’m a person, asshole, I have a brain. I’m not something you can put on a pedestal to ogle at.” Well, he knew *that*.

He looked back down at the notebook in his hands. Always carry a notebook, the desk had said, for when inspiration sparks. He had drawn a picture of a floor lamp there. Not exactly words. Someone walked by, whistled at his picture. Another person said, “My, my, I haven’t ever seen a floor lamp so pretty.” They didn’t need to tease or make fun, it wasn’t his fault he liked the floor lamps.

III

He clutched the sheaf of papers in his sweaty hands. The desk had said, “Come back when you know what you care about.” So he had sat on the edge of

the fountain in the park and figured out what he cared about. But, when he thought of telling the desk what it was, the words all jumbled on his tongue, and he could hear the laughter before he ever spoke. So instead, because he wanted to know how to write, he wrote it all down.

“Well, this is a little fast,” said the desk, taking the papers. “You’re catching on. Good job.”

“Tha-that’s what I care about,” he stammered, pointing at the papers. His cheeks turned red. Then the room was quiet as the desk read all he had written. His brow furrowed, and he flipped through the pages faster and faster, then he looked up.

“This is the second rule of writing. Never write your perfect world. In your perfect world there is no tension, no conflict.”

He found all the papers back in his hands, he looked at them dumbly. This was his perfect world? He could feel the tension falling off the pages onto his hands... a girl who didn’t see the world like anyone else, who lived in a world of furniture. And then one day she sees a tall, handsome full length mirror, and she falls in love. And they live happily ever after. No tension? This was his life!

IV

He sat on the grass out of the way of any prying furniture. No people would walk by here to see or watch, no distractions. But still his pencil flew over his paper and he drew trees and grass and birds, and a picnic. That’s what it was, a picnic. And there was the picnic basket, center of everything, the mother, the caregiver. Someone walked up and offered him thirty five to draw a picture of him.

“I’m a writer, not an artist,” he replied. The man shrugged, rolled his eyes, walked away.

What did he care about? He cared about furniture! Why did the rest of the world have to be so mixed up?

V

“What can I say?” said the desk after his sixth or seventh attempt.

Then the desk sighed. “Look, if people don’t care about what you write about,

than *make them care.*”

VI

“Well,” continued the desk after his ninth or tenth attempt. “Some people just aren’t meant to write. And that’s all there is to it.”

VII

He left the building all alone and headed back to his apartment. He had a notebook full of scribbles and no stories worth a cent. He couldn’t seem to focus now, so he crossed the street instead of turning right and went to the fountain. He sat on the edge of it and thought. Then he started drawing the whole mob of people walking by him, only of course they weren’t people. They were pieces of furniture, clumped together, helter skelter, out of order, almost chaotic. A man came up and said,

“My name’s Arthur Fields, and you’ve got some real talent. I’m a patron of the arts,” he added by way of explanation.

Then Arthur Fields offered him sixty dollars for the picture, and he sold it.