

Original Fiction

He writes in obscurity, the old man does.

He's not sure how he got there, he tells himself. But he knows, of course. Everyone knows how they got to where they are. But the self-lies help and so he hangs on to them. Someday he'll believe them. Maybe he already does.

It's not that he wasn't someone once. He was.

The awards on the wall, the certificates, an occasional trophy. They tell the story, but then that's the story of another life so he doesn't think about them. They all belong to the other guy. The guy no one remembers. Let him have them, the old man says to himself.

73. How did he get to be that old, the man wonders. The future once was bright for the old man. The present was bright.

That was back when he was creative and witty and sharp and could make people laugh with a turn of a phrase. Could bend a word to make some magic.

Words were always the old man's playground. He loved 'em. Really did, too.

Made his living by them. An ad man, a copywriter, a "wordsmith" they called him, even though that wasn't a real word.

There was a time when people paid him for his words, big money too. He discovered long ago that lots of people could draw pictures, or arrange things on a page, or sell an idea, but few—very few, in fact—knew how to tame words.

Everyone swims in a world of words but only some can pluck the right ones out of thin air. And when you can, and when you can do it at the right time for the right people, they'll even reward you for it. The old man knew it was never how many words either, but how few. The secret was in less, not more.

The others never, ever got that.

And that's why he loved words.

And punctuation. Punctuation was cool.

The old man loved commas, colons, parens. Did not like semicolons particularly and hated exclamation points! Ellipses were alright...but mostly because they had an awesome name. They were all part of his family.

Some were necessary, all were appreciated, a few were beloved.

But now the old man writes in obscurity.

He still loves his words. It's just that no one else does.

The love affair goes way back. Way, way back. He was just a punk kid when he started saying words that were too big for him. It was cute then and his mother would prod him with things like, "Say that thing you said the other day."

The kid would repeat whatever it was and the friends would laugh, either out of politeness or because it was genuinely funny. How could he have known? He was just a kid.

Once when he was in high school, he was given an assignment to write an essay on some topic and, just for the heck of it, he wrote three pages of total nonsense with the goal of using nothing but meaningless, invented words that had not an ounce of substance but sounded impressive. The kid got an A-plus.

That's when words became a permanent part of the old man's life.

No.

When they became the driving force of his life. His oxygen.

But now he writes in obscurity.

The words go up in the air. Up into the ether and just dissipate. Sometimes he wonders where unheard words go. If there's a cemetery for them, then he has certainly filled a grave or two.

It wasn't always like that...and that's part of the curse.

Once the words mattered. Once they moved people. Once they were transformative.

Once they turned into gold.

Maybe those words are preserved somewhere. Someplace where they never tarnish or become outdated. A heaven for the special ones.

But not today. All the words are old today. They are tired. Really tired.

Steinbeck, Hemingway, Fitzgerald. Now those guys had some damn fine words. Theirs live on. But I bet you dollars to donuts if they were alive, they'd be tired of them too.

They'd shake their heads and wonder what all the fuss was about. Because they're just words.

The old man writes in obscurity now. He knows it.

Sure, there are books on the shelf with his name on them. Right there at the bottom of each cover. When he got really successful, his name went on top.

No one has opened one of those books in years, he figures, and there are times he wonders if anyone ever did. Maybe they were just purchased, the royalty checks say so anyway, but maybe never read. Just collected and placed alongside the other dusty ones. Could be.

If that's the case, the old man is OK with it. It is what it is.

After all, he didn't write for them, he wrote for himself.

It wasn't that way at first. At first, he wrote for them. Hanging on reactions, waiting for comments, wanting their approval. And then one day it didn't matter. Just didn't matter.

It wasn't that he had evolved into some higher state. It was simply that he wrote because he had to get the words out. They built up inside him and tortured him.

The pressure became unbearable as they screamed at him for release, and he could find no peace until he allowed them to escape.

Out of his head and onto a piece of paper. Just get them out. That was all that mattered. Otherwise they clogged up his head and squeezed out everything else. Things that mattered more.

Nights were the worst.

That's when the words gathered and pooled and nested. They compounded and multiplied on top of each other, and nothing made sense until he let them out. It didn't matter if they made sense on paper, just that they were out. Finally out.

The old man was a manual typewriter guy. Old school.

He used a sickly green portable Smith-Corona that his mother had handed down to him. Well, received by default really because no one else wanted it. She used to type at the kitchen table—he never knew what—and look intense and focused.

From time to time she would lean back in her chair and read what she had just typed while taking a long slow drag on her cigarette. She'd smile, or grimace, or stare blankly for a minute and then get back to it. The old man, when he was a kid, thought that was impressive.

By the time he went to college, the Smith-Corona traveled along with him.

It had carried him through school and then through some early writing jobs and now he felt like he couldn't abandon it. Sure, he'd like to work on a Mac like everyone else, but he felt like he'd be unfaithful to the old thing.

You don't just get rid of something, you know, because another shinier thing comes along.

In high school, in his college dorm room, in his first apartment with four other buddies, and in the early days of his first marriage, it had always been there.

There with the constant clack-clack-clack of the keyboard and the keys hitting the paper. It was enough to drive everyone crazy and the old man blames it for driving most of the good people out of his life.

Truth be told, he loved the old thing though. Somewhere in the past he named it Elvira. He didn't know why. It seemed cool at the time. Now it sounds pretentious and stupid. Not that he would ever tell Elvira that.

Yeah, he loved her. It was a fact.

He loved the way that the "s" landed just slightly higher than the other letters. Something about that struck him as hilarious, like the "s" thought it was better than the other letters. Maybe it was. Who's to say?

It was annoying at first. Then it was just part of his life.

Still, as he pulled each sheet of paper out of the roller—loving the click, click, click of that as well—he always stopped to admire the beauty of a page filled with words—flawed though it was.

It had long ago ceased to matter much what the content was, he was happy to appreciate the visual representation itself—a page full of words on paper. What a beautiful thing.

All the pages ended up being books. All the books ended up on shelves. And all the shelves ended up gathering dust.

Sometimes that made the old man feel sad. Like those precious words, the ones he had sweated blood over, were now trapped in there. Imprisoned. Destined to live in obscurity like him.

He might have deserved it, but they didn't.

What did they ever do to be sentenced to live in darkness on some page when they were born in their own time with such delight, such brightness, such promise?

Sometimes he wishes he could set them free, but he doesn't know how. Maybe he could rewind the tape and the words would disappear as quickly and easily as when they had once arrived.

There are the books on the shelf, but then there are also the books that exist in never, never land.

When the old man started to write in obscurity, so did the words he wrote. Elvira even promised to keep them a secret.

The secret books, the private ones, the quiet ones, they exist too. They are written, they are edited, they are proofed, they are real. But they are not released. They live in their own world like bastard brothers and sisters not allowed out into the light.

The others—the published ones—they get to live in the light. That makes the secret ones sad. Jealous and sad.

Of course, they don't realize that light doesn't necessarily mean happiness. Sure there is excitement at first but then the moment passes and the darkness—the darkness of the shelf—is more intense than the earlier joy.

The Quiet Books don't know this and so they long for the light. Silly things. If they only knew.

What upsets the Quiet Books is that they believe they're better than the ones in the light—they call their adversaries the Loud Books—and that just compounds their pain.

Worse yet, there is no promise they will ever be released, ever set free.

If they ever got to be a Loud Book, of course they would then look down on the Quiet Ones, but until then...

The Quiet Books fear their words will start to disappear and one day will be left with only blank pages.

If the old man goes, so will they. They desperately want the old man to hang on, but there's no guarantee of that. Life goes on, but old men don't. The clock is ticking for the Quiet Books.

Then there are those stories that are yet unborn.

They are longing for life. They push, they strive, they dream, they hope. But this is not their time. They fear there will never be a time. They've watched as some of their ilk are stillborn. Delivered but with no life. Delivered with promise, but no life. This scares them. Terrifies them. And so, some hide while a few push even harder in desperation to at least become a Quiet Book.

All of the stories—those unborn, those that remain quiet, and those out in the light—have taken a toll on the old man.

Maybe that's why he writes in obscurity now. It lessens the pain.

For years, Elvira couldn't keep pace with the old man's mind. She was breathless in trying to move as quickly as his overburdened brain, but that was long ago. Now she just sits patiently and waits. Waits for the words to come.

Sometimes they come. Sometimes they don't. Sometimes she knows she's only there on that day as a companion. There will be no words on this day. And she's OK with that.

The old man knows that the words in his head have never slowed down. They whir and blend and stretch just like they always have. It's crazy up there. It's a whirlwind, a tornado, a hurricane. Words, expressions, phrases.

Now getting them out, that's another thing. Another thing entirely.

The old man blames Elvira. She's too old, she's too slow, she's too outdated. But he knows—just like she knows—it ain't her at all.

The old man also knows that the words have cost him dearly over the years.

An addiction to words, chokes out the laughter of children. It deadens the lightness of a good joke. It robs the joy of a moment and mitigates the beauty of a friendship. It steals what is precious and replaces it with something temporal.

That's the problem with words, they think they are the most important thing in the world. They think they live forever. But they don't. Oh sure, some do. Most don't though. Not the quiet ones, the secret ones, the unborn and the stillborn. Those words aren't eternal, that's for sure.

And so, over time, people just move away because they know they are not as important to the old man as words. People just go out of focus.

The old man knows this. The kids call less often, care less, have fewer things to say. There are no more Father's Day cards. They can't remember the old man's birthday. He doesn't blame them one bit.

The wives and friends are gone too. The darkness didn't leave any room for them. They contained light. Light doesn't light dark. It never will. They can't coexist. Light doesn't like to have a cup of coffee and a bagel with the Dark. They just go their separate ways.

And so the old man writes in obscurity.

That's all that's left really. If you've chosen to make your bed with words, they own you.

The old man has made his peace with this.

He was never a great writer, his books are nothing special—all fiction. He's OK but so are thousands of other writers. Probably millions.

Hell, even the story about his mother typing at night on the old Smith-Corona is made up. The original fiction. She never typed a day in her life.

He bought the portable at a secondhand store for twenty bucks when he was in his thirties—an "aspiring writer"—and began bragging to his friends about how great he was.

"Gonna write the next great American novel," he said.

That was when he got a pair of wire-rimmed glasses and bought a used tweed coat with leather elbow patches because it made him look the part. He smoked a pipe because, well, that's what writers do.

When the diagnosis first came, it was a shock.

Well, that's not completely true. He felt that the words had given him a hint: The words knew before he did.

Elvira knew too but she, like she always did, just kept quiet. The people in his universe kept quiet too. Best to leave him to his words, they whispered. They comfort him.

But it was only a matter of time until the words began to leave him too.

The old man knew this was going to happen, but he just pushed the thought way, way back in his brain. His head was still full and that was sufficient for the moment.

Then one day he went to reach for one and it wasn't there. It had always been there. Always available, always on the tip of his tongue.

Elvira was the first to notice it. It concerned her, but she had the patience of a saint. He'll bounce back, she thought. This is just a temporary setback. But she knew better, though. Elvira knew the old man better than anyone else.

For his part, the old man just thought it was age. He was 73 after all. People forget things. What do they call it...having a senior moment? No big deal. Funny, in fact.

But it wasn't funny when he was alone.

The old man knew he was writing in obscurity now.

The house was dark. It was the middle of the night, or early morning or late in the evening...he wasn't really sure. Didn't matter.

He had words to get out. Words that had been trapped for decades and deserved to be released. Expressions to set free. Phrases to form. Stories to tell before it was too late. Before all the words dried up altogether.

It didn't matter that he hadn't eaten in a while. Or that the coffee pot had long ago boiled over and burned on the hotplate. Or that the furnace had gone cold. The words were pushing him hard.

"Damn it all," he muttered to himself. "Slow down for godsake."

He looked up at his books on the shelf and they seemed deadly silent. Mocked him even. They were just collections of paper, an assembly of words.

They didn't feel like his friends anymore. It made him sad.

He looked out the window and nothing came.

He looked at Elvira and she just stared back. She was tired too. She was a sickly green.

But he continued to write even when the words no longer made sense. He just plodded along comforted by the keys hitting the paper. Lulled by the sound of the roller going around.

Just setting the words free.

He noticed for the first time that the letter "s" was slightly higher than the others. Who did it think it was after all? Better than the other letters? It made him chuckle.

There was no paper in the roller. He couldn't remember the last time there was.

It was dark now.

He couldn't see his fingers on the keys.

Elvira had left him.

But still in his head was the clack-clack-clack.

He writes in obscurity, the old man does.