



TWO SIDES OF THE STORY

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A. The Paralyzing Pursuit of Perfection

Laziness, writers block, life interrupted or lack of inspiration described the pedestrian problem she knew the members of her writers group thought she suffered from; the reasons preventing her from getting back to the novel she had stopped and started writing at least seven times.

She assumed that before she arrived and after she left, her writing group colleagues spoke of her unkindly. In her presence they clucked sympathetically and most commented on having experienced a dry spell or two during their writing years.

She hated this characterization. A dry spell conjured the writer who flailed at her keyboard, meaningful prose refusing to appear on the screen despite hours of effort. Or the writer who ferociously pedaled the stationary bike at the gym, pouring the energy she didn't have to write into the unsuspecting machine. No, a dry spell meant one couldn't write because the words made themselves unavailable. That didn't apply to her at all.

She had words. She had a great many very good words. She used some of them to write some excellent sentences. Some of the sentences related to one another to construct a powerful paragraph. She was pleased with this work, but she knew she could not continue it and be honest with herself about her *raison d'être*.

Anything short of astonishing, of Pulitzer Prize worthy contention, simply could not be written. Not by her. She paused over her keyboard, the cursor rhythmically blinking its soundless metronome of time passing. The pause became a hiatus. The hiatus became a sabbatical. The sabbatical became inertia.

The high-minded pedants in her writing group had no idea, she knew. She suffered a unique malady that demonstrated her commitment to her craft. She thought of her affliction as the paralyzing pursuit of perfection. Her knowledge that unless she could write an epic, meaningful, critically acclaimed, readers delight she should write nothing at all kept her away from a keyboard for months on end.

She told her writing group that she purposefully chose not to work. That she knew the career-making novel she felt destined to pen had not yet fully hatched in her head yet. That she patiently waited for the burst of energy and torrent of prose to come pouring out of her as she knew it would in time.

She now only touched the keyboard with a Swiffer duster. The now dark screen asleep so long, the computer had turned itself off in a thoughtfully thrifty moment one night long ago.

“Just start writing,” her writing group colleagues at first calmly and then insistently advised. “Writers write,” said one prolific grand dame whose literary trifles sold well but whose pages whined at the reader.

She sat calmly taking in their input, allowing it to drift through her head nearly noiselessly, a background whir of a jet plane, or the hum of lawnmowers on a Saturday morning. Hearing them, but not important enough to listen to them.

She tried not to look as smug as she felt. Sure that her masterpiece waited for her. Maybe it would be today, she thought, practically skipping out of the group meeting, not noticing the rolling eyes and pantomimed whirling fingers that spoke the universal language of insane.

B. Crippling Censorship

It’s easy to pinpoint what intimidates her from just sitting down each day and writing. Self-censure. She is certain that she doesn’t have what it takes to put down the whole story; not even the courage to face the dragons.

Day after day she sits in front of that mocking cursor willing herself to just start typing. Intellectually, she knows that the words will come if she would just start writing them. But something is blocking her. Something is keeping the prose locked away behind an impenetrable wall in her head.

She thinks she understands the problem; her reluctance to be completely honest with her feelings and her stories; the people she will hurt, the relationships she will harm, the lives that will forever be altered by her revelations.

And for what? It feels selfish to write the whole story. But, implicating those who should be called to account feels necessary, authentic. On the other hand, she is doing just fine, thank you very much. Why shine the light in the places she has so successfully kept protected in the darkest corners of her mind?

It’s this that has blocked her. This fear that she is being selfish in her slavish insistence to telling her story in full rather than the cherry-picked version she has opted to share so far.

Her work is good. She knows that innately. And she also knows that the praise she has gotten from others is real. Although she writes off some of it as simply the kindness of those who love her, she has braved sending her work further afield. Far enough from the inner circle that politeness would give way to honesty and if the work stunk, she’d know by now.

But even those closest to her sense something missing—the pieces don’t all fit together in a way that makes any sense. How she got from point A to point B is a chasm of omission that she has so far been unwilling and unable to traverse.

Her carefully self-edited history has gaps and holes that need filling for the work to feel fully alive—and to fully make any sense.

But she's afraid to open the box where she has carefully preserved the most potentially destructive memories—the ones that could take down marriages and alienate children from their parents. And cause repercussions she hasn't quite envisioned but innately knows to be cruel and permanent.

She fantasizes about writing them in invisible ink; putting them down just to get them off her chest. And then, even as the ink is appearing on the page, the characters are disappearing. And she then she pictures the published version of some classified governmental report with giant swaths of black obliterating the "sensitive" information, so that the words left legible are snippets of gibberish coupled together by blocks of black.

She remembers being a first-year associate and reading and redacting the deposition testimony of a witness who was a criminal defendant in a white-collar crime case. By the time she finished, the neatly typed pages each looked like a Rorschach test.

She smiles at this thought, pausing to consider a favorite short story about giant ink blots, her mind pinballing from one thought to the next, each taking her a bit further from considering the subjects she has so far avoided.

She now recalls her first attempt at paper dolls, an older cousin showing her how to carefully create an accordion of folds, alternating the paper back to front, front to back. She watched her cousin carefully cut out simple triangles and half-moons and unfurled the paper with a flourish to reveal six identical paper girls.

But when it was her turn to try, her cousin carefully handing her the scissors handle side first, she bent over the folded paper, biting her bottom lip with intense concentration, her small hand not quite able to squeeze hard enough to cut through the folded edges. Her cousin soon tired of watching her struggles and moved on to leafing through a teen magazine with Bobby Sherman's wide blue eyes staring back from the front cover. When she declared her masterpiece "ready" and her cousin glanced up with rolling eyes, the unfolded sheet resembled a Cyclops. She had incorrectly folded the paper and simply cut a giant circle through the full sheet. Even now her cheeks get hot at the memory of her cousin's derisive laughter.

But these are detours, this clutter of memories pinging around as she sits, back erect, hands poised over the keyboard. But she doesn't type. She tries to quiet her mind, to still her thoughts and find a spot to start. But the single words that pop into her head—cheating, incest, beating—all hit the same wall and bounce back into their mental storage bins.

She soon gets up from her chair, race walks around the house hoping her increasing heart rate will bear the memories along the swifter current of flowing blood now thumping in her ears.

But, no, she only notices an ache in her left knee as she jogs up the stairs. It's still throbbing when flops back in her chair, a bit breathless.

She settles into her typing posture, raises her hands to the keyboard, stares at the cursor and waits.

She takes a deep breath and begins typing.

"I recall the lightness I felt at my grandfather's funeral; the relief."

She stops. Stares at the sentence. Backspaces over the characters one by one. Censoring herself into silence-- again.