

THE WRITER stood before his toughest critic, shocked that the only sound from the shrunken man propped up in the bed was a constant hissing sound emanating from

his throat. Recoiling from that jarring sight and sound from his adversary, the visitor was nevertheless urged on by words from his soon-to-be widow sitting next to him on the folding chair adjacent to the bed. “Go ahead and talk to him,” the elderly woman pleaded. “They say the last thing to go is your hearing.”

The critic’s daughter, head bowed in prayer with a man that the guest presumed to be her husband, now looked up. “I can’t believe what his attendant said yesterday in his presence.”

“He didn’t mean to be cruel,” the spouse of the critic said, a half-hearted defense at best.

“We had him transferred to another wing,” the daughter insisted. “His joke wasn’t funny.”

The writer, Nick DeClerc paused, now unsure what he wanted to say. Last night he composed four pages on motel stationery, pouring out his emotions, the anger and hurt building with each sentence, the pencil stub his powerful weapon. He had

The Critic

JOHN A. TURES

expected to deliver it to that smug Author-in-Residence in person, letting him know exactly how badly that man’s critique in college was carved into Nick’s psyche.

Decades earlier, DeClerc had entered Callaway College, armed with a stack of writing awards, proof from his high school of his talent. Even the jocks and cheerleaders held a special reverence for the gangly teen everyone in class called “The Next Stephen King.” He even had his choice of prom dates, all convinced of his future financial success when he would surely make *The New York Times* Best Sellers list.

The choice of Callaway was hardly an accident. The college employed Matthew Rooker as an Author-in-Residence who taught a special class on writing short stories, available only to honors students. But DeClerc’s vita, transcripts, and a small gift from his parents to the college’s foundation assured him of a seat in the crowded class, the one each English major hoped to take some time in their four years in higher education.

Rooker was brilliant, entertaining the class with readings of his short stories and selections of his novels, each of which had taken their turn at the top



Toni Morrison

of the bestsellers lists for books. DeClerc even drove to a reading that Rooker gave at a nearby Borders Bookstore.

The highlight of the class would be the final assignment. Replacing the exams was a prompt to write a short story. In his exuberance, DeClerc’s work began to resemble more of a novella. In his writing, the freshman poured his heart and soul into a tale of how he and his older brother hiked much of the Appalachian Trail the summer before his high school sophomore year, finishing only a few months before Ray’s diagnosis of and subsequent death from AIDS.

Nick could weather the “C-” on his transcript, but he couldn’t handle the comments. The text was marked up everywhere across each page, as if forged in blood, documenting numerous



Stephen King

errors in spelling, grammar, point-of-view lapses, and the absence of adequate transitions between paragraphs. The final dagger was plunged on the last page. “While your topic is compelling, the execution does not measure up to the lessons I taught you in this class,” Rooker wrote. “This paper will require plenty of revisions and rewrites before it can ever be published.”

Those final words sealed DeClerc’s fate as an English major. He said as much when he marched into Rooker’s office to inform him of his transition to the business department, punctuated by a few choice critiques of Rooker’s literary works. The shock and hurt look on the professor’s face gave Nick at least some satisfaction that the critique’s insult to his writing ability was answered in kind. DeClerc never again entered the



Virginia Woolf

confines of the Slaye Liberal Arts Building, preferring the flashier Bearden Hall for the next several years, where accounting, entrepreneurship, and marketing were taught. His talent for composition guided him to a career in business communications, landing a public relations position in his senior year with Minuteman Insurance. DeClerc didn't even bother to show up for graduation, wishing to avoid an awkward confrontation with the Author-in-Residence at the ceremony. "In absentia" was what the Provost of Callaway College announced after reading DeClerc's name and Magna Cum Laude distinction, according to his parents and girlfriend. It was another insult, as the course clearly cost him Summa honors.

The ambitious writer's abilities helped him rise quickly through the



George Saunders

company, even earning him a spot as the vice president of marketing. Yet DeClerc still had a chip on his shoulder, wishing he could write fantasy, horror, or science fiction instead of a cost-benefit analysis of term versus whole life insurance.

DeClerc even went to JordanCon in Atlanta one year when Rooker was the headline speaker. He rushed to the mike after the speech, eager to inform the entire room at the fantasy event that it was all a lie, that Rooker didn't mean it when he claimed to care for his students. But the line for the microphone was too long, and the event ended without his desire for revenge to be sated. On an international business trip, DeClerc tried to rearrange his schedule to let Rooker have it at the World Fantasy Convention in Britain, without success. His collegiate



John Steinbeck

girlfriend, now wife, begged him to let it go. "You've got a great career, plenty of money and friends, and a family that loves you very much. Isn't it enough?"

It was not. Every trip to the bookstore with his family was a painful reminder of what could have been his life. He seethed: that should be me on the book jacket, doing the reading that afternoon, or being featured for his debut novel on the poster in the front window.



"I wish more had come," Rooker's wife's sad voice thrust him back to the present. She sighed, resigned to a conclusion that would soon be upon them.

"Dad could be tough," the author's daughter admitted. "Those who received his reviews could only see the



Maya Angelou

criticism, and not how many hours he put into reading every single word, hoping, even praying that his advice would make a difference in their lives and help them become successful authors, just as he had been able to do."

Rooker's wife nodded. "I even told him to just add the positive notes at the end of each paper and not place personal compliments on the backs of pages. Too many missed those words of inspiration."

A strangled gasp, a close facsimile to the sounds of the dying man in the bed, escaped from DeClerc's mouth. He had shown up to fight, but now flight seemed his only recourse. He mumbled some lie about needing water and darted for the door. Outside the room, he sat in one of the cushioned chairs in the hospice's hallway, tugging the crumpled manuscript from his



Robert Frost

jacket pocket. This time he ignored the bloody words in red, committed to a painful memory, and smoothed out the pages, turning them over for the first time since the day he considered the Waterloo of his writing career. Sure enough, there they were, in light blue, which he had never seen before in his shock at the negative review years ago.

“I want to thank you for writing this, Nicholas,” the note began. “I’ve never gotten over the tragedy of losing my son to that mass shooting at West Virginia State University, the worst day of my life, and its painful anniversary this week. But your story gave me the strength to persevere through this dark memory. I know you’ll be disappointed with your grade, but not everything should be about a single letter. I pray you’ll make the changes and send it



James Baldwin

to *Aurora Charter*, where the editor’s family are close friends with mine. You won’t just have only a publication in a respected literary journal when you make these detailed edits I left you, but this should help you with the start of a great career as a fellow author. Please keep writing—the world needs more storytellers who can transform the reader like I know you can.”

The ink on the page suddenly began dissolving before his eyes, like invisible ink working its magic in the movies. It took him a few seconds to realize what had happened. The page was now wet with his tears.

The angry screed scrawled on stationery from the hotel, now torn in half, was tossed into a wastebasket in the hallway. He returned to the room but ignored the three inquiring faces.



Ralph Ellison

Instead, he moved to within inches of the crumpled figure on the mattress. As he gave his name, he added “Sir . . . I’m sorry. I didn’t take your criticism well. I said some things in your office that were . . . I’m sorry for saying them,” he wept. “I didn’t realize all that you wrote in blue. I was just so mad I didn’t even notice . . . Well, I’m going to finally fix it and send it to *Aurora Charter*. I promise!”

There was a slight pause, and then the wheezing sounds changed, sounding a lot more uptempo.

“Is that . . .”

“Yes,” Rooker’s daughter insisted. “He only does that when one of the three of us tells him a happy memory.”

“Or when a friend drops by to thank him for all he’s done,” Rooker’s wife added.

DeClerc’s chest finally seemed to



T. S. Eliot

slacken, loosening its grip for what seemed like decades.

“Would you . . . please share that short story you wrote . . . with me?” Rooker’s wife pleaded.

“I promise.” And DeClerc meant it. It took a second to realize that the gurgling sounds had stopped, but the wail from the medical machines hooked up to Rooker hadn’t. The alarms began and a siren began to scream. Rooker’s daughter seemed unfazed by it all, pushing a button to summon the nurses, Roberta and Diana. The commotion down the hall was getting louder, but the cavalry would come up short that evening.

As DeClerc’s tears resumed, the daughter squeezed his arm. “Don’t be sad,” she insisted as her husband moved in to give him a guy hug. “You helped him die with a happy thought.” ♦