

His Malaise

by *Anthony Bell*

You begin to wonder why you're sucking so much. Where you're going wrong. What word needs to be replaced or whether any of them do. You are a man at the center of crossroads that share 360 degrees of identical background, a man who has forgotten which way it is to anything.

Maybe the editors are idiots.

You collapse the story and open a new Word document, wanting less of a puzzle. The blinking black rectangle floating in whiteness doesn't diminish your dilemma at all. So into space you recede.

You think about the reactions of those who've read your work: your family, a few friends, a literate coworker, an illiterate coworker. What direction did their lips first move after you asked if they'd read the story yet? How was that first intake of breath? Their eyes, how did they roll?

Dunno.

Maybe you don't want to remember because then you'd concede to knowing that they didn't enjoy the stories as much as they said so, because if they had, wouldn't—well, wouldn't they ask about them? Maybe as the ending sentence to a football conversation, or after concluding an inquiry as to whether Sarah has a cute, available friend. Or are you being self-conscious there buddy, reading too much into nothing?

The feeling remains, though.

You pick up that magazine you didn't get published in and read the first line of a story. Compared to one of yours it's interchangeable, yet your cover letter was returned with a rejection.

In story after story and book after book you've read numerous examples of bad writing, of dull, clichéd, and gilded passages you've put so much effort in eliminating from your work.

You slap the magazine onto your desk, and after not feeling the release you want, hurl it across the room, but it unfurls and flaps itself into a stall, still ten feet from the intended wall when it sighs to the ground. The rumpled literature—published, rumpled literature—seems to moon you; its curvaceous checks split by an offending crack directed your way, and you want to cuss, and loudly. A quick explosion from the gut, but you don't, fearing it will come out wrong, fearing your voice may even squeak or you won't hit the

timbre you imagined yourself reaching, instead inverting the force of the moment into an adolescent's embarrassment. So you don't cuss, not even quietly. Like a deflating doll, you blow the frustration from the side of your mouth. Your arms fall to your sides. You want to fall to the side. What is there to fix? What sucks? Why?

You want more than a form rejection. You want a personal rejection, something scribbled by the editor on your returned cover page, illegible but replete with the potential that could reverse the suckiness your stories amass like bad cholesterol. Something acknowledging your work. Something pointing out how the plot is too disjointed when in fact you thought the clarity was there; something spelling out your mire with dialogue, how your characters speak as though in an Orbit commercial; something telling you the story is great, but not for this magazine, although such and such magazine may be interested.

However, you have none of this rejection, and without it, you're reluctant to continue modifying your stories, playing with the dialogue you're unsure the quality of, erasing the chapter that seems superfluous but also necessary because you wrote it—you're reticent because you can't get the car to start, and you're unsure whether you should be fucking with the same solenoid or batch of wires when they could quite possibly be the farthest factor from the cause.

So here you sit, with accomplishment bearing its rear-end your way and not slumped against the wall, and with numerous stories you don't know how to proceed with. And rent. Don't forget rent.

To compound your problem is the killer idea you've entertained all day, the story needing to be written, and soon. But the latest rejection has again lowered your already-weathered optimism, and the ups and downs of hope are more strenuous than those of running stairs. So which direction do you walk with this? You like the story and see yourself loving it as you write it. Yet there isn't a damned thing you want less than to write this awesome story, receive opinions from five others, revise it twenty times, edit it, send it out with a raised chest and level chin, only to receive a form rejection eight weeks later with a euphemism for: "Sir, it is unfortunate that your story was too sucky to warrant a personal response; you suck at life—and writing; please at least cease the latter."

Negative, buddy. Can't stop doing what you love, delusional like Pepé

Le Pew following wonderful scents with unrequited passion or not. There is a way, that's a given, but still you stand at the crossroads, without the perspective of a hundred miles farther on to summon. And having studied the stories contained in the magazines you've submitted to (as recommended by said publications) and that studying having not raised your publication chances, you consider the practicality of really enjoying, really putting hours in, and really screwing another interesting idea.

You like the stories you've written and have allowed time between the writing and revising of them to accumulate a good dose of objectivity. With this acquired requisite, you've evaluated them to be quite good.

That thought remains for a minute.

You entertain the idea that you're an idiot, not the editors.

It's a sour idea, and there blinks the rectangle on the blank Word document before you. The probability is high that what will progress in front of that blinking rectangle once you begin typing will, for some reason of which you'll be uninformed, not meet the requirements for publication in the magazine you submit it to. The probability is also high that in the beginning few weeks after submitting it you'll feel positive about your publication chances. Then continuing into the final few weeks before the average response time, you'll be telling yourself you're positive about your publication chances (because not to would invite sure rejection, as everyone knows). And as you open that letter you'll no longer be able to tell yourself you're positive about the desired answer because you've been in this same position a dozen instances before and can't imagine a different result.

But for the sake of argument, as your stepdad would say, trace everything back to where you started. Go from the beginning and, piece by piece, examine all you touched. Your stepdad is a handyman, a do-it-yourself, figure-that-shit-out kind of guy. You once replaced the alternator and voltage regulator in your mom's '67 Malibu and when reconnecting the battery it sparked like crazy and a wire smoked. For an ohshitohshit instant you pictured the classic engulfed in flame, the midnight blue paint peeling back as you hesitated back and forth, seeing neither a fire extinguisher, a bucket of water, nor a time machine. The mitigating lies rushed to your mind as the mortality of your life became real for the first time as you imagined confronting your mother before she viewed the horror herself.

You weren't destined to die that day, however, and you learn there's a dead short, a current going directly to ground. The handyman told you so. You replaced two simple components, but that didn't go as planned. The simplicity increased your frustration, as did your hunger and the dismal day at work. The

car was not covered in fire, though, so you knew the pooch hadn't been screwed yet. You took a literal step back, then went from the beginning, checked the battery, which looked correct; then inspected the connections on the regulator and traced your way to the alternator. Sometimes all a person can do to control the urge to hurl something and yell is snicker. That and shake their head. You forgot to apply the buffer nut between the alternator and its battery connection.

So, for the sake of argument, you love what you read, the books about fantastical situations with vampires, ghosts, space voyages, telekinetic kids, and dead narrators, but maybe that's not what you should write.

At least not now. Maybe the editors aren't idiots, and maybe you're not, either. Maybe you're just a beginner, with no good or bad connotations with the label.

That black rectangle continues to blink, and it seems to countdown now. Seems to blink more slowly, become more prominent in the white expanse. You recede into space again, daydreamer eyes arising, unfocused but aware. You like your stories, but you're not publishing yourself, so you begin typing. Words pop from nothing onto the white page and try their damndest to keep up with the rectangle, always close but never quite reaching it.

Words explode everywhere, huge and with no linear sense as they arrive from your mind because you don't maintain the luxury of scrutiny as the story rolls on. You type and type and type without much thought or pause in the depression of keys. Type and type and type. And type some more.

Then you're done.

The story has reached its end. You read it over, then read it again. It's a normal story without any fantastic elements; a story that could occur tomorrow or yesterday or in Nebraska. There's feeling, but it's too subdued to engage you. You don't much like it. It's bland. Granted, the language is nice, but the story is boring.

You don't feel revising necessary. You change a word here and there and give it a nice, broad title to match its feel. You search online and read the "about us" on a dozen literary magazines' websites. You pick three, then flip a penny to choose the one you'll send it to. You don't care that the penny isn't three-sided. It lands tails. You forgot to designate which magazine was heads



and tails. The next day you send the story out.

A week passes and you've forgotten the main character's name in the story. A second week passes and you've forgotten you've even submitted the story. During that second week, you write the story you were hyped about the night you wrote the one you have forgotten. You spend hours doing nothing but writing. You are exhilarated. It's surreal, has twists and turns, even a drop. You've managed to sweat, for Le Pew's sake.

Four of your friends read it; your mother reads it; two of your mother's hearing-impaired clients read it; Aunt Jonnie down in California has you email it to her so she can read what all the talk is about; your college literature teacher reads it. That literate coworker of yours reads it. Everyone loves it. The reactions are honest. They are interested. They want to know why you ended here—hey, maybe you could make it into a book. Yeah, a great idea, another agrees. Would you, please? You're ecstatic that they're ecstatic. You read it over one more time, smell the paper, and send it out. It's hard to stop smiling; they hooked you good.

Three weeks later you receive the response in the mail. In your room, you look at the letter as it sits atop your desk amid magazines, books, pens, and a CD case titled Music for Readers. You stare for a few minutes. Then you open it like a child who still believes in Santa. That smile is on your face again. The letter seems thicker. Its envelope is torn open and that smile is still pulled back by fairies with hooks in each cheek.

But they release you, because they aren't allowed to return to their magical realm with those they snag. You burn the SASE with the contents inside.

Two weeks later you receive another SASE in the mail. You look at it funny because you recognize your handwriting, but not the magazine you supposedly sent a story to. You unfold a cover letter. There is scribbling along the bottom, a whole paragraph.

Again you're like that man standing in the center of the crossroads, that man who turns ninety degrees four times with no change in scenery. You snicker and shake your head, and walk, just putting one foot in front of the other.