

Stars

2400 words

I said, "This doesn't feel like it's gonna work."

"Little tight," Ned said.

"For Goodness sakes," Holly said, "I've never heard so much hemming and hawing."

"Really," Rosie said. "What it is, they're afraid to expose their inner selves."

Finch said, "Okay people, let's focus if we may. We have our first handout." Holly took the folder from him and distributed the paperwork.

The only one who hadn't said anything, pro or con, was the new guy, who'd shown up from New York. Ralph Salvatore.

Finch was asking for a show of hands.

We were in his motel room, which he rented long-term. He was pacing around holding a clipboard, these two gals Rosie and Holly on the bed and Ned and I and Ralph in these folding chairs that Finch borrowed from the breakfast buffet.

Finch said, "Good then. Do I have a volunteer to lead off?"

“I’ll go,” Rosie said.

What was happening, we got railroaded into a writing class. Or I did, and told Ned to join the fun, and amazingly he did, and he recruited Rosie.

We found out Finch was a semi-famous writer once. Holly looked at him as a mentor, and I felt bad for the old guy and tried to get him un-stuck on that final novel he supposedly had in him, titled *Monte* something.

Then it started as a joke, this part, Holly telling Finch, “Hey, you should teach a little workshop” and Finch blew it off like you’re out of your mind . . . and that was a couple weeks ago, and here everyone was.

Looking around the room, man it was stuffy in here. I’d complied with Finch’s first assignment and written a one paragraph summary of a novel *I* could see someone writing about *me*.

It wasn’t very good, I hoped I wouldn’t get laughed at--but okay, it could be interesting to hear what the others came up with--and Rosie stood and gave it a big exhale and started off.

‘If a person wrote a novel about me he would make me one of those performers you see at the circus who fly the trapeze. When I was 8 my

mom took me. It was downtown, the Garden. The announcer was very loud. Not just for the high trapeze part but all of it. After, my mom complained about the noise to some person and they gave her a number to call. I don't remember this. She told me a lot later.'

People shifted around and I assumed they were waiting for more--which I was too--and then it took Rosie a minute to sit back down, which added to the possibility--but no.

Finch cleared his throat and said, "Well, Rose . . . I call that a wonderful start."

Jeez, Rose.

"I second that," Holly said, pinching Rosie on the shoulder. "Wonderful premise, I'm seeing several directions the line can take."

"Well thank you so much," Rosie said.

"What happened when your mom complained?" Ned said.

I said, "Yeah that. And the *line*?"

"Storyline," Holly said. "Plot points. And whether we're talking omniscient narrator, stream of

consciousness, or another point of delivery. It's all fascinating."

"You're full of shit," I said.

"I agree," Ralph said, who you didn't expect to hear from. "But I like the set up. Reminds me when my Uncle Rocky brought us there, we's about the same age. Took the train from Eastchester to 42nd Street, then we had to walk though."

"Same thing then!" Rosie said. "Me and everyone, we took the 1 train. Though you could change to the express at 96th."

"Where'd you grow up at?" Ralph said.

"Let's stay on course, if we may," Finch said. "Not that the backstories aren't interesting, but who is next?"

"I'm fine," Holly said, and she stayed seated on the bed and pulled a folded paper out of her purse. She seemed tense.

'I'm a wife in a bad relationship. The setting is 1950's Culpeper, Virginia. My husband is cheating on me, and barely attempting to disguise it. I wish to cheat on him too, but I'm unable to . . . and it proceeds from there.'

Again you were aware of Finch clearing the throat. This time he paced a bit more and you assumed he was formulating some positive commentary, but Ned spoke up. “I like it,” he said.

“I do too,” I said.

“That makes three,” Ralph said. “I’d keep reading, at least ‘til it slowed down.”

Finch said, “An interesting point. How would it proceed to slow down ineffectively, in your view?”

Rosie said, “Why can’t the woman cheat on the man?”

“I haven’t established that yet,” Holly said.

“You mean, she wants to,” Ned said, “but can’t come up with a willing partner?”

“Or she’s screwed up physically,” I said, “and has the partner, but can’t.”

“Or mentally maybe too,” Rosie said. “She wants to . . . howyoucall . . . intellectually . . . but there’s a little lightbulb holds her back.”

Holly said, “I hadn’t explored it that way--but Gosh, that may be the best one.”

“Which one were you leaning toward?” I said.

“Ned’s way. But I see now, that was dull and cliched compared to Rosie’s way.”

Ralph said to Finch, “Answering your question. It would slow down when she started thinking about stuff too much, instead of doing shit.”

I said, “Why the Culpeper, Virginia? You ever been there? I mean, is it even a real place?”

“I have not,” Holly said, “but I believe I’ve heard of it, so it must be real.”

Ned said to her, “You ever been to a shrink?”

And more shifting around and a couple coughs, and Holly said, “That’s a nervy question. I’d ask what gives you the right, but I guess I don’t mind.”

“No need to upset the apple cart, hon,” Finch said. “No one’s unwillingly on stage here.”

I didn’t care for the *hon*, but it was what it was, Finch was a harmless old guy with some new life injected in him, and it wasn’t surprising if he and Holly had developed a benevolent-uncle relationship.

Holly said, “I’m fine with it. We’re among friends, I feel . . . Yes, I’ve been in therapy.”

“Only reason I ask,” Ned said, “your type set-up, isn’t it what the psychoanalytical folks have a field day with?”

“I see what he’s saying,” Ralph said, “could there be more to it.”

“Like a dream you mean,” Rosie said. “How would it be explained? Like you’re a human being, now, in this room . . . but you go another direction, and create a different world--but it’s still you in it--and what’s the reason?”

“Oh boy,” I said.

“I’d love to announce that I’ll ask my therapist for an interpretation, but we cut ties two years ago,” Holly said.

“Good move,” Ralph said, “you look fine.”

“He’s probably right,” Ned said.

“Could very well be,” I said.

“Next?” Finch said.

“I got it,” Ned said, and he found what he needed on his phone and started reading.

“My guy--you want it to be me, so fine--my guy’s Czechoslovakian. On his 21st birthday he gets a trip together, go back there and find his roots. (I shoulda said, he lives in Florida.) The problem being, there isn’t any more Czechoslovakia. He finds out they dissolved it. There was a revolution in 1992, it turns out, which he should have paid attention to in

school, but didn't--and they disposed of the place . . . or deposed it--or the government. He gets to the airport, finds this out, and the check-in girl is quite nice, explains they didn't get rid of it, exactly, they just split it in two. My guy gets this, but it's not the same, finding his roots is shot, and he doesn't want to travel. But he asks the check in girl how about we grab a drink when you get off work."

Ned waited. Holly spoke first. "That's a novel?" she said.

"In there somewhere I was thinking, unh-huh," Ned said. "No?"

"I think it's brilliant," Finch said, and you could see him right away regretting the use of that word, implying he liked it better than the other two.

"I wish *I* thought of it," Rosie said. "In a different form of course."

"I think it's a bunch of gobbledy gook," I said, "but I have to go next."

"So your honest opinion is worse?" Ned said.

"My honest opinion is--all that build up, when all your guy is seeking out . . . is a piece a ass."

“I would agree,” Ralph said.

“Well I wanted to redirect it that way, yeah,” Ned said. “I don’t know enough about other countries to keep it interesting.”

Finch said, “Clay, can you conclude for us tonight?”

“Do I have to stand?” I said. “Because I really didn’t have a chance to put much thought into this.”

“Listen to this guy,” Ned said.

“Yeah, now the shoe’s on the other foot,” Holly said. “We had more time than you?”

“Yes get real Clay,” Rosie said. “Our ones so far, they sounded like we worked on them for days?”

“You definitely didn’t,” Ralph said, nodding.

Finch raised a hand again. “Before we hear what Clayton has to offer, I will say, from personal experience--positive and negative--that often the first incarnation of an idea works best.”

“What I think you’re getting at,” Ned said, “is like in school, if you’re going B, then don’t over-think it into D.”

“Exactly,” Finch said. “James Joyce would work all day trying to get one sentence just so. Marcel Proust, for one, could write half a dozen chapters in the same time.”

This ground any momentum to a halt, and I was afraid Finch was going to continue on this tangent, especially if anyone prompted him further.

“Okay we get it,” I said. “My deal, welp, here goes nothing.”

‘My character is Archie. Archie doesn’t have a lot of friends so he joins a chess club. This is in Kansas City, where he ends up after running out of gas, while running away from alimony payments in Oregon. He’s the worst chess player in the club but that’s okay, because he starts getting more attention--people trying to help him--than if he was the best player. One guy in particular tries to help him the most, gives him a couple books on basic strategy, and Pete thanks the guy by inviting him and his family to a pool party. (He doesn’t own a house of course, it’s an apartment complex, but still.) So the guy does show up with his family, but one of his kids is wild and mixes it up with another kid in the pool who lives in the complex. The other kid’s dad comes down to the pool and Archie’s chess guest dad confronts this guy. By now some

drinking's been going on, at least with the chess dad, and the two of them kind of bear hug and plunge into the pool with their clothes on. Archie knows he should do something--but he also wants to see how it unfolds, so he just sits there on the chaise lounge. And long story short, the one guy drowns."

"Oh no, which guy?" Rosie said.

"The guy who lives there," I said, "but let me finish. They *think* he drowns. They drag him out and lay him on the side of the pool, there's a crowd by now, and some little guy pushes his way to the front and does something to the guy's chest, and stomach too, and son of a gun the guy spits out water and is okay."

"That it?" Ned said.

"Almost. Archie thinks he recognizes the little guy, and that the guy's been tailing him from Oregon. So the next day Archie tries to get back at the guy by asking his girlfriend out on a date. She refuses, so Archie gets in the car and moves on. Probably to Little Rock, Arkansas . . . That's not clear yet."

“Hmm,” Finch said finally. “Anyone?”

“Not really,” Holly said.

“No,” Ned said. “Except you used my part, the guy putting on the moves . . . But the dude’s own girlfriend, isn’t that kinda out of bounds?”

“Especially when he did you a favor and saved your friend,” Rosie said.

“Not his friend, necessarily, but I hear you,” Ralph said.

That was about all the fireworks. Holly brought out the box of cookies that I assumed were standard in these meet-up deals, and Rosie helped Finch bring six cups of coffee back from the machine they had in the lobby, and everyone shot the breeze about trivial stuff--the Dodgers outfield prospects after acquiring Mookie Betts, the new regulation in Manhattan Beach where you had to walk your bike on the Strand because some guy got run over, a fourth ice cream shop opening in town and how was it going to make it.

“Well I have to say, this has been better than I expected,” Ned said. “You got me thinking different ways here.” And he thanked Finch, and the others did too, including Ralph, and Finch asked Ralph if he wanted to contribute a novel idea of his own, even

informally, and Ralph said no, but he'd take a rain check, and maybe next week if he's still here.

Finch gave out the new assignment, which was to skip ahead and write the very final scene of your novels, where you finish it off with THE END.

“I must say, Terrance,” Holly said, “that goes against the grain of your personal approach, does it not?”

“It does indeed,” Finch said, and he left it at that, and a minute later I watched Ralph and Ned get into a car together. I couldn't pinpoint it, but I felt a little nervous for Ned . . . and meanwhile I figured that's what a good instructor does, he keeps you off-balance.