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R.J. Sommers

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R.J. SOMMERS

Abby Smoker

The single-spaced paragraph on the “About the Author” page of R.J. Sommers’ latest novel says she lives in a one-story house on the edge of a city. It says she is renowned for writing relatable characters and compelling relationships. It says nothing about her own friends.

Gazing from a photo at the top of the page, R.J. Sommers appears to point a camera toward her readers. Its flash shines with rays as white as the page as they glint off the mirror she took the photo in. The readers see her wearing dark lashes and a dark turtleneck in front of a wall coated with pages from rough drafts except where a typewriter, nightstand, and stool cluster before it. With the camera’s glare against the mirror, everything in the background appears dark and the words on the wall are impossible to read. Those who consider Ms. Sommers their favorite author have often found this summary unsatisfactory, but as there’s no address on the page to send fan-mail or suggestions to, Sommers’ does not know their thoughts. She might not change anything if she did.

What R.J. Sommers’ “About the Author” page doesn’t mention is how she takes forty-five minutes out of every weekday to visit her friends. Today is a sunny Wednesday, and after hours on her typewriter, trying different phrases in different orders until she has forgotten their original meanings, Ms. Sommers pulls on leather

boots and listens to the rhythm of her steps down her porch stairs and the concrete of the sidewalk. She can hear her typewriter clack with each of her steps, each one a letter in her brain's next sentence. There is always another sentence.

The sun glitters on license plates and blades of grass, but none of her neighbors are out today. As she approaches the end of her street, yellow eyes waddle from behind trash cans and leap down from gutters. Her camera clicks like the letters of her typewriter as they come closer, as they wrap their tails around her ankles and greet her with a chorus of mews. She sets a timer for forty-five minutes and leans against a streetlamp, not saying a word.

Not a week later, on a Friday, Sommers wakes up to silence. There is not another sentence. Her mind is so clear of typewriter sounds that for the first time in two years, seven months, and four days, she consciously hears her neighbors' car leave at 6:43 a.m. It rumbles carefully down the cobblestone street with a failing muffler. Sommers' hands are trembling. She reaches for her leather gloves, lined with fleece, where they lie on her coffee table as she rises from her living room couch, but it is a mid-September morning and the house is not yet cold enough for her to need them.

She cannot make eye contact with her typewriter on her way to the kitchen. When she opens the cabinet to get her mug, her spoon slips from her fingers. As its silver clatters on the tile floor, she hears it as typewriter keys emptying from their machine, scrambling themselves on the floor, and yet against all odds, not forming a single word. The clatter dissolves into a buzzing and now her head is

buried in her arms, the porcelain rim of her mug pressed into her forehead.

Her hands still tremble as she sits at her typewriter after breakfast. She sets her fingers against the keys, a practiced, instinctive movement. Her mind is silent. A September breeze ruffles the leaves on the oak tree beside her house. The boards in her walls creak from its influence. Her pinky lifts and types a letter. The responding clack nearly surprises her. What will she do with the letter "z"?

She stares at it. Its sharp lines soften, the letter "s." It spins on its side, the letter "n." Still, no character names come to mind. No lines of dialogue stretch out across her mind's page. She focuses instead on the papers on her wall. Their words are shreds of stories and character moments that were cut from her finished stories, yet often serve as inspiration for new ones. She has read them so many times over that now they hardly have any ring. The silence is tension in her shoulders. It is the grinding of her teeth. There is not another sentence.

Often while writing she has turned around to see herself in the full-length mirror on the wall. This has eased the heaviness in her chest, although perhaps not the occasional stinging behind her eyes. Today she turns from the page with its lonely "z" and someone forlorn gazes at her through the glass. Their hair is stringy and needs to be washed. Their hands are in beautiful gloves that do not match their bouncing knees. There is a hole in the bottom of their right sock

when she flexes her foot. Ms. Sommers stares at herself and wishes she were not awake.

Within the drawer of the nightstand she sits at, her phone buzzes. She checks the notification—NPR has just released a new podcast. She’s not interested, but she unlocks her phone anyway. Sets a timer for forty-five minutes. She grabs her camera and steps into the morning sun.

The cats are not used to her visiting them this early in the day, but several still gather at her feet, and before long, news has spread and a group of about fifteen arrive to greet her. She wonders if they are confused. She tells them she is, too. She can hear the thuds of their paws when they land on the pavement beside her and she notices the variations in their mews. She has never noticed these things before. The silence pools in the palms of her hands and the spaces under her eyes.

Her timer goes off too soon. It requires a finger’s tap to silence it, but her hands remain motionless—one limp at her side, the other buried in the fur of the nearest cat. There are no new sentences.

She goes home and falls asleep.

Several days pass and the world is louder than Sommers has ever heard it. On Tuesday, she sorts through printed photos of her friends. The photos slide on the hardwood table and flutter between her fingers as she flips through them. Her kitchen table is laden with stacks of them, one pile for each cat. She tries to imagine the cats talking to each other, but even knowing them as well as she does, the resulting dialogue is always stale. She tries to make them spiteful.

She tries to make them fall in love. She tries to give them complicated relationships with their relatives. But no matter how she twists the conversations, she is never content with the sentences that result. They are too obvious or far too subtle. They are nothing worth writing down.

To her credit, she does try writing them down, anyway. Just to get something on the page. But after barely an hour of this, she is buried up to her ankles in scraps of pages—none of them preserved. She needs new characters; her old ones have forgotten how to talk to each other. They only grunt and murmur and they are too lazy to have conflict. Even an enthusiastic voice, inserted into scenes with them, spirals rapidly into another one of their plodding plots. She has just begun gathering the papers on the floor, stacking them into a pile of potential scrap paper, when the table buzzes. She stops the alarm on her phone, leaves the papers half-organized, and starts out to see the cats.

The woman's arm comes out of nowhere. One minute, Ms. Sommers is passing her neighbors' hedge, and the next, a thick purple sleeve catches her forearm and a woman with orange wispy hair looks up at her. Her eyes crinkle as she folds Sommers' hands in hers.

"Sorry to bother you, ma'am, but I must have your help—I have an entire meal to prepare for a group of visitors before six and I have only just now arrived home from visiting my friend's cousin in the hospital. We brought balloons for him, you know, and stayed with him as long as the day's light poured in through the

windows... But I sincerely require your help. I'll give you the easy prep jobs, if you like, only do come in—yes, you may leave your boots by the door—and wash up while I set out a cutting board.”

Somehow in the midst of this outpouring, Sommers finds herself swept up the front steps into the woman's home. Already she can feel the fog thickening in her skull. It is true, that the sentences were missing before, but now their sounds are locked out completely. She clenches her hand rapidly, lifting it to her ear to hear the leather rub against itself. Let there be something. Let there be content braided in with the silence.

At last, words fall out of her. She starts hesitantly, not knowing what to call her hostess or how to say Your presence is stifling. I cannot be here.

But her hostess hears only that she doesn't want to intrude. “Don't worry at all my dear, you are fully invited—not just to help prepare, but to stay the whole party. I would never turn you out after you had helped me, especially out of your own inconvenience as it is. Please make yourself at home. And don't worry about bothering our organization of coats at the door—God knows, there is no organization, not the haphazard way my husband lives. Inviting guests over when I haven't been home all day! But no matter, it will be nice to fill the house again, even if just for an evening.”

R.J. stares at the woman. She thinks of her typewriter at home, set beside a stack of unsatisfying pages, and with a satisfying upheaval, she shoves it away. She looks at her hostess' living room,

complete with patterned brown couches and a shaggy rug. She sees it empty, she imagines it full.

When she turns from tucking her gloves in her pockets and hanging her coat on a hook by the door, the kitchen counter behind a couch awaits her with a newly-rinsed cutting board and paring knife.

“If you cut these avocados, I’ll start the main dish. Thank you so much, dear.”

R.J. picks up the knife. She’s hardly made her first incision into the fruit before a smile flickers across her lips. She can’t help it. After a silent, stifled laugh, she asks her hostess her name.

“Oh, I’m Wendy Graham.” Wendy is resting chicken breasts in a 9x13 as she speaks. “I am truly so glad I caught you this evening. It feels as though I never see anyone on these streets.”

R.J. quips something about having a busy schedule. Chip, chip, chip, her knife on the cutting board. Tck, tck, Wendy shakes a bottle of seasoning over the chicken. A minute later, Wendy steps away from setting the oven’s temperature and waves Sommers’ attention toward it. “Let me know if that beeps, will you? I’m going to run upstairs and find a better tablecloth.”

R.J. nods and turns back to the avocados as Wendy exits through an archway on the right side of the living room. Heavy footsteps ascend a series of steps. The thuds sound like the music of sentences again, building up in small clauses, falling hard as steps in the form of sentences, starting again some fifteen times before reaching their peak and shuffling away into softer paragraphs. But

although R.J. recognizes their music, there are yet no words to match them. Her attention shifts to the thumps of her blade on the cutting board. She writes a story with the sounds. With each cut, she adds another indecipherable letter to her manuscript. But no inspiration arrives, and soon, she begins not to care. She pushes, again, the typewriter from her mind. There is something captivating about just the evening sunlight in the window, held gently behind linen curtains. The feel of the knife's handle, metal becoming warm in the squeeze of her hand. And the sound of a vehicle pulling in outside, parking on the grass beside the full driveway. This last sound is particularly amusing, as it is followed by a shout from upstairs and the thumps of Wendy Graham's sneakers pounding down the stairs.

"They're here?"

The music disappears. R.J. watches a cloud fly onto the table, landing as a pile of silver tablecloths. Released from her burden, Wendy rushes to the door—takes one second to smooth her hair, tuck in her shirt—then pulls it wide-open. "Welcome!"

R.J. leaves her post, taking advantage of the ruckus of guests entering and assembling and greeting Mrs. Graham to drape the tablecloth over the table. She listens to the guests speak to one another, their words crunching together. Not dialogue unfolding, but brokenness—stammers and restarts, generalities and platitudes—spiraling out before the group, tying them together with some thread that Sommers cannot hear or see, but she feels tugging her toward them nonetheless. Henry Graham, Wendy's husband, tells the story

of how they got lost on their way there and then, at last, notices R.J. Sommers. "Who is our other guest, my dear?"

"Oh, yes!" Wendy turns to face her. "What is your name, honey?"

R.J. obliges them. The party stretches on for hours, with the food being just enough to sustain them, but leaving them no reason to complain. When she leaves at long last, balancing a plate of leftover brownies in one hand, R.J. feels the spiderweb strings cut off by the closing door. She returns home under streetlights and moonlight and as the cobwebs peel off her sweater, the evening crickets start singing words again. Her coat whispers as it brushes against fabric when she hangs it in her entry closet. She sits at her typewriter for twenty minutes before she falls asleep. The words are not great. The dialogue is not inventive, the characters are not active. But though she hates the completed two pages, she doesn't let them fall to the floor. They are tucked into the drawer of her desk with her timer. Then she goes to bed.

An afternoon not long after, R.J. Sommers works on her manuscript for three hours before her timer rings. The plot builds steadily, though she knows it winds, and the characters do not address each other curtly enough. But it's something. Her timer rings, so she lays the manuscript to rest for the next hour and forty-five minutes and pulls on a coat. A few cats will still find her, even with the snow, but that's not the thought that draws her out the door. She makes it halfway down the street before she turns left. Her boots thud on the driveway pavement. With each step the words of

their rhythm fade. They are just thudding boots. Her fist hitting the door is just her hand knocking on wood. The voice that responds is not a line of dialogue. Only the voice of Wendy Graham, who dares to beckon her.

“Rachel! Do come in. I have been dying for visitors.”



A SILENT WALK IN THE WOODS

Elaine Brandenburg