

Bill tried to ignore them but each time he plodded by, they became more aggressive. They blew out the candle in the jack-o-lantern; tripped him with sticks; and finally stepped on the end of the stalks, by now trailing on the street. Bob, sitting near on a rail fence, blinked back hot tears, humiliated and sad. He saw the three judges, as one, turn their eyes away from the disintegrating corn shock and toward the garish, crepe-papered bicycle and cart. Bill, peering through the little slot, saw this too. Suddenly he could control himself no longer—the jeering, the immobility, and now the disappointment. In one convulsive movement, he shed the now-hated corn shock and leaped into the knot of his antagonists. Arms and legs flailed; feet kicked and stomped; and he battered them with his head. The boys, stunned, stumbled away from the whirling dynamo, but Bill, seeing only a red blur, leaped after the fleeing figures and rode one, half again his size, to the ground. The two tumbled over and over on the graveled street, Bill thwacking the other boy at every turn with his work-hardened fists.

“I’ll fix ya’.” Smack. “You Bastard.” Bang. “Take that . . . and that.” Slam. “I don’ . . . want . . . their dam’ . . . five dollars.” Sock. “Someday.” Sob. “Someday I’ll have a million dollars. . .”

A WRITER’S LESSON

Melissa Stone

“Speak to me, Wise One, and impart unto me those qualities favored by the muses and possessed by the universal scribes whom fortune has smiled upon through the ages. Homer, Plutarch, Shakespeare and Chaucer! Milton, Bacon, Hawthorne and Camus! Frost, Eliot, Ibsen, and Albee! Tell me the mystery of these men so that I, too, may reach the pinnacle of aesthetic bliss through my art. For art is the true . . .”

“Kid, are you telling me that you want to be a writer,” the good humored professor interrupted as he lit the stub of a stale cigar.

“Not just a writer, Sir! I want to be a master!”

Dr. Clinkenfroth studied the tall, slim boy who sat on the other side of the mahogany desk. The student radiated a contrived, eccentric air with his immaculately wind-blown hair and dark eyes which every three to five minutes regularly lost their intensity. His mud color sweater boasted the marks of a true scholar, fake leather elbow patches. His Oxford cloth shirt was frayed at the cuffs, an effect which had taken many consecutive washings to achieve. On the floor next to him rested an Army-Navy surplus daypack laden with heavy books. He chose to be addressed as Charles, although his family and friends insisted on calling him Charlie. Dr. Clinkenfroth felt a surge of fondness for him and chuckled as the word "master" crossed the serious boy's lips.

"Surely, you have some ideas that can help in my noble quest?"

"There's nothing noble about writing, my boy. It takes hard work and the formula. Why, everything from 'Paradise Lost' to the latest Harlequin Romance follows the formula," Dr. Clinkenfroth fibbed with glee.

"A formula!"

"Yes, a formula. Not just anyone can master the formula, though. A true writer must have certain qualities before using the formula successfully to catalyze a reaction between ideas and language, to create masterpieces."

"I'm an adaptable person. Just tell me what these qualities are, Sir."

The professor paused, wondering if he hadn't taken the mock lesson just a little too far. Deciding that Charlie was a rare case in need of a lighter view of writing, the professor continued.

"The first quality is masochism."

"Masochism!"

"That's what I said. We both know that inspiration comes only in small, electrical spurts. Consequently, when one hits you must be prepared to exploit it. A writer must deny himself food, drink, sleep, yes and even T.V., in order to capture the inspiration's essence before it fades. Why, John Steinbeck lost 25 pounds writing *The Grapes of Wrath!*"

"But, Sir, I always thought that writing was a disciplined thing. Why, denying one's self food and all is awful. It has nothing to do with discipline."

"No, it's not awful, my son. It's masochistic and that's what you have to be."

"I guess you're right," muttered the confused student.

Dr. Clinkenfroth sighed, but continued. "The second quality you must possess is the ability to be long suffering."

"Isn't that the same as being masochistic?"

"Heavens, no," chuckled Clinkenfroth. "You inflict suffering on yourself to be masochistic. To be long suffering the world shovels it out to you."

"Oh, I see. When I eat onions and get gas that's masochism. But when I get a C on a paper and I accept it, that's being long suffering."

"Ummm, yes. I mean so to speak. Charlie, you . . ."

"Please, Sir, call me Charles."

"But yes, of course. As I was saying Charles, does a C on your paper really cause you to suffer? Do you feel worthless? Do you feel that life is not worth living? Do you question your entire being?"

"I certainly do, Sir!"

"Then you haven't been embracing life, my boy. I suggest that you dirty your hands. Go out and have an older woman for a lover. Drink to excess. Be poor. Develop cancer. Have your mom die. These things will make you suffer, I can guarantee it!"

"Yes, Sir. I'll see to it tomorrow."

Amazed, Dr. Clinkenfroth smothered his cigar in a brass ash tray and moved around to face Charlie. The boy seemed content that the professor was telling the gospel truth. Flustered, Clinkenfroth straightened his suit and continued with new vigor.

"The third quality a writer must have is self-confidence. Every writer must maintain the firm belief that every word, period, semicolon and hyphen he writes encompasses an aesthetic truth which no other human being is capable of disseminating. Then the writer must behave accordingly."

"Are you saying that I have to be arrogant? I mean if that's all there is to being a writer, I mastered that long ago. Don't you think there's more to it than that?"

"Yes, there is, as a matter of fact. Which brings me to my final point. A writer must live a Bohemian lifestyle, an arrogant, Bohemian lifestyle. You must be unconventional. For instance, sleep by day and work by night. Select a particularly dumpy bar and frequent it. Try piercing one of your ears. Eat nothing but Chinese food. Do you see what I mean, Charles?"

"Yes, I see it all! But I'd miss classes if I slept during the day. And drinking at bars and eating Chinese is expensive. And, Sir, I'm certainly not going to pierce my ear!"

"You're missing my point. You have to make sure that your lifestyle reflects the fact that you're a writer. Although you and I know that writers lead normal lives, the public doesn't. So you have to fool 'em. Go Bohemian. I think it will suit you!"

Moving back around the desk, the doubting professor straightened his papers and sat down.

"Charles, what do you think of the four qualities? Do you agree? Do you disagree? Or do you want to give it some more thought?"

The moments ticked away as the late afternoon shadows invaded the room, creating the sense that time had run out for the boy writer. With the shadows, however, Charles' eyes assumed a genuine intensity as he pondered what the professor had said. His hand came up and brushed his hair astray, topping the contrived wind-blown look. He assumed a languid yet attentive pose in his chair as he took off the sweater with the fake patches.

"Dr. Clinkenfroth, I don't believe that the qualities cover it at all. I mean, I disagree with you."

Clinkenfroth smiled.

"No, I'm serious. I don't think that being a long-suffering, arrogant masochistic Bohemian makes a good writer. The only thing that makes a writer good is the ability to see and taste and touch and smell and hear."

"You're on the right track, Charles. Take it one step further."

"Writers write!" the young man exclaimed. "That's it! Writers simply write!"

"Point made," the satisfied man proudly confirmed. "That's all there is to this lesson. Good luck, my boy!"

Walking out the door, Charlie stopped as a mischievous smile consumed his face. "Professor Clinkenfroth, I would still like that formula you were talking about. You know, the one used by Milton and Harlequin Romances."