

Outside Insides

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I can see it now. "He's lost it," they're thinking. They're probably all in some stuffy boardroom sitting around a huge table sporting their expensive suits with ridiculous I'm-rich-but-still-hip ties. At this very moment, Frank, my agent, is probably defending me with an arsenal of his finest bullshit. Sitting alone at my desk, I can practically hear him addressing a table surrounded by executives:

"I can personally assure each and every one of you that he will meet this deadline. Surely every person in this room has been in publishing long enough to recognize the enigmatic nature that often accompanies brilliance. Van Gogh cuts off his ear, Newton pokes a needle into his retina, Mozart composes a requiem at the demand of his dead father's ghost, and Sands locks himself in a little cabin upstate. What we're really dealing with here, people, is a failure to let genius flourish. Walter Sands can't deliver with a hoard of executives constantly breathing down his neck. When Da Vinci painted the Mona Lisa, he certainly didn't create his masterpiece with an assembly of authority figures threatening his livelihood with every brushstroke. Mr. Sand's next book won't be like *Insides*, he wants nothing to do with *Insides*, but I assure you that, from what I've seen of his new manuscript, our man has something even bigger in store for the world..."

It's funny trying to remember the romantic view I once had about writing. I used to envision myself saving the world one novel at a time, reaching out to all the kids who grew up feeling like me. I was going to let them know that they weren't the only ones marching to a different beat. I was going to be a gracious celebrity; shaking hands, never refusing an autograph, constantly assuring my readers that they too could rearrange their deepest sorrows into something beautiful, something truly meaningful, but I never did.

At the time, I was clueless that my glorious notion of an author's life was a fantasy. It's so strange. I felt incredible when I finished *Insides*. Better than I've ever felt in my entire life. Then the public got a hold of it. Maybe that's what I'll write my second one about. About the disillusionment one undergoes after realizing that-- never mind. What the hell am I thinking? That's an atrocious premise for a story.

Enough reminiscing. The fact of the matter is that I *do* have a deadline and, thus far, I've got nothing. Not a word. Any minute now, Frank will be calling to reiterate each of these points to me, but, today, he'll be armed with a series of threats fresh from his morning meeting with the publishers. I can't even take a piss in a public restroom and these bastards expect me to churn out another bestseller in a matter of weeks with the added pressure of my career's fate hanging in the balance? I always wonder how it is that Corporate America could possibly be involved in the "art business." The idea of bringing accountants, advertising, bottom-lines, and a bunch of bastard CEO's into the creative process doesn't strike me right. The fundamentals of mass production and art don't fit. Not to mention critics, who, despite having never met you, make a living by telling other people what your work *means* and whether it's good or not. These realities had not been part of my fantasy world. Nor had writing some "incredible" story that nobody really understood but loved anyways. It was almost nicer when my stories were overlooked and/or despised because I could still have the fantasy. The emotions involved were much less confusing-- my stories still belonged to me.

The phone is ringing, it must be Frank.

"Frank, what's the latest ultimatum?" There's no answer. "Frank?"

"Hello sir, I'm conducting a poll and I would like to know if I could get your opinions on a couple of matters." I don't know what to say. I could simply answer this woman's questions. It is just a telephone call.

"Um, sorry I-." I'm struggling to find the right words. "Just-can't-do-it-have-a-good-one." I slam down the phone.

I'm not ready to deal with people again. It's probably better that I didn't talk to that woman in the first place. I might somehow throw her off. Besides, if I really did give her my opinions, she would probably have trouble making them fit into to some uniform checkbox on a sheet of paper, but I'm sure she'd try her damndest.

I've got to get some work done. Here I am, sitting in the same spot in the same chair facing the same window. The outside looks empty. It's freezing this time of year. If there's one good thing about this old little cabin, it's that its walls are thick and it's never too cold for me. I stare out at the bare white treetops and try to inspire myself but it's useless. They look trapped. It's almost like the few leaves left blowing around are mocking them in some cruel way. It's got to be this spot. I can't possibly be creative in this desolate spot. I need something. I need to make thoughts flow, but first, I need an idea.

Think. Try pacing. Keep trying. Try harder.

Enough of that. Thinking and pacing are out for today. I need to free myself. Maybe I should try writing naked. Seems like a sound idea for thought. I'll give it a shot.

I strip down and I'm standing naked in the middle of my cramped little cabin and the inspiration is yet to come. Think about nudity. Think about the function of clothes, the act of undressing, the feeling of being exposed. Think about "private parts" and why, exactly, they're considered so private. Think about concepts. Think about the Bible saying that God made humans ashamed of their natural forms as part of the punishment for Adam and Eve. Try to come up with something, anything to provoke a thought. Think about judgment. Think about the last time you saw another person nude in real-life. Think about how pathetic it is to be standing bare-assed in your tiny cabin straining to recall your last sexual encounter. I catch my reflection in a mirror hanging from one of the walls. There I am; skinny, weak, disheveled, and so pale that my skin brightens the room. An artist would never sculpt me. I'm no magnificent specimen of the human race. I am, generally, unremarkable. I want to put my clothes back on now.

As I'm zipping my pants, the phone rings again. "Frank."

"Walter, it's not looking good," Frank says, using his usual opening to our conversations.

"Let me guess, the publisher is pissed, we're being threatened with a lawsuit for breach of contract, and absolutely no one in the boardroom thinks I can write another 'good' book."

"Bingo."

"Did you give them a speech?"

"Of course I gave a speech. I threw in a little extra here and there but it was relative to things we've discussed." Frank starts to chuckle, "I suppose I should inform you to that you are now expected to live up to the likes of Mozart and Leonardo Da Vinci in terms of your career-- just a fair warning. I was laying it on pretty thick in there, but you know business people, they eat that sort of thing right up."

"Why is that?"

"The possibility of soaring sales figures and repeated successes, books, in this case, that provide the corporation with multiple viable streams of revenue excites the hell out of those boardroom vultures. You know, basically anything that makes them believe they haven't invested in a one-hit-wonder practically makes them need to change their pants, but they're skeptical-- skeptical enough for you to worry, my friend."

"Jesus Christ, Frank! I'm going to have a fucking panic attack if you keep hinging everything on sales figures and talk about one-hit wonders. I think it's obvious that I don't deal well with this kind of stress."

"I'm just trying to motivate you, Walter. Don't get all worked up. It's paramount that you address the threat looming over our careers ASAP. I've got college funds to worry about here." I can tell that Frank, despite his attempts at lightheartedness, is on the verge of panic himself, which is rare for him.

To keep the conversation going, I foolishly ask the first question that comes to me, "and what, exactly, is this massive problem?" This is going to piss Frank off a little.

"The book Walter! I was just in a room full of suits promising that your latest manuscript was destined for greatness, fortune, notoriety, and a few other equally cheesy overstatements, and you're yet to write a single word! You don't even have a fucking concept to bounce off me!"

"Sure I do." I'm not completely sure if Frank knows that, at the moment, I have nothing. I need to start thinking very quickly if I have any chance of calming him down.

"And?"

"Okay, so this closet morphine junky goes in for a prostate exam and the proctologist almost immediately asks him what he's been sticking in his ass. So the junky tells the doctor that he injects that way because it makes the high easier to stomach. Of course, the doctor, in his infallible understanding of mankind, doesn't believe him. So there's this whole scene where the MD keeps insinuating that he deals with people sticking things up their asses all the time and that it's okay to be who he is and all this other 'coming out' lingo as if the junky lacks some sort of confidence or awareness of himself that the doctor, in his ultimate wisdom, just happens to possess despite the fact he's only spoken to the guy for about 3 minutes. I guess they're teaching insight in med-school now."

Frank sighs. "Get on with it, Walter."

"Then, later that day, our sore comrade is smoking a cigarette in the car on his way home when he drops an ash on himself and blurts out 'son of a bitch!' Unfortunately, he doesn't notice until he's already verbalized the phrase that his father's best friend had been jogging towards his car when he dropped the ash and, in passing, noticed him mouth-out 'son of a bitch.' His father's friend shoots him a stern, disappointed look, giving our protagonist confirmation that

he believes the junky was provoked to refer to him as a 'son of a bitch' simply by the sight of him. After that, just when things can't possibly get worse for our poor friend, he puts in some eye-drops at a stop sign, looks up, and notices a woman from his family's church staring at him from inside her car with an unprompted look of sympathy. He's naturally perplexed by the woman's expression until he realizes that the lady thinks he's crying. She's staring at him out of pity. She feels sorry for him, and the junky can sense it. So, as a result of being constantly misconstrued, the protagonist kills himself. What do you think?"

"Yea, that's perfect, Walter. I'll go to the publishers with some thinly-veiled, overextended metaphor about a guy who starts a chain-reaction of misinterpretation by literally screwing himself with his chosen intoxicant and then dies from his self-inflicted wounds. We'll call it, *The Strings on Mr. Sand's Miniature Violin*."

I can't believe what I'm hearing. I'm not even sure that's what I meant but-- damn that Frank.

"And truthfully, Walter, as hard as I'm trying to contain my laughter, hearing your little 'cabin narrative' was the best I've felt all day today. As pathetic as it is, as *you* are right now, I can relate enough to your sad life to somehow feel accompanied for a second. But the story's mine to feel my way; that's part of the deal. I know you have mixed feelings about the success of *Insides*, but it's incredibly pretentious to loathe mass production while wanting the whole world to hear your words and it's even more selfish to wallow in misery because people love your baby for all the wrong reasons. It's theirs, too, thanks to you. Time to break free from those flimsy paper walls of yours, buddy."

We sit quietly for a few minutes before Frank breaks the silence. "I'll talk to you tomorrow, Walter," he says before leaving me alone on the line.

Hours pass before I can quiet Frank's words enough to think. The cabin's not as warm as before. I look outside and stare at the empty treetops. I think about trees. I wonder if some ever die of self-hatred for loving the leaves too much, knowing all-too-well that their creations grow only to live up to their names. I decide that isn't it, though. Trees live through too many seasons. It's more likely they know their place the same way the leaves know to find theirs.

A group of leaves, the last few remaining on the ground, waltzes by on a gust, floating willingly past me and the trees towards unforeseen destinations. Something about the way they move reminds me that more of them will be back next year and that, on their insides, underneath everything, the trees are still alive. They have been around a long time and, within their trunks, they have the rings to prove it. Before I know it, I'm standing in front of my window, forehead pressed hard against the glass, staring in awe at the suddenly beautiful scene outside that's been sitting in front of me all this time.

After a few minutes, I turn around and catch my reflection in the mirror across the room. A large, red circle sits in the center of my forehead. It makes me smile for the first time in a long time, and it tells me that I've survived the winter.