

The Product of a Nightmare

By Elizabeth Simons

Ever since I was a child, I have enjoyed a very active imagination, which might have been what inspired me to study creative writing. Unfortunately, as almost everyone knows, imaginations exist only when they are NOT needed. As soon as I needed to write something (such as a school assignment), all fountains of creativity would suddenly dry up.

This problem, of course, is something that high school teachers try to fix. One teacher that I had even suggested that I try to like what I write, in the hopes that my enthusiasm would produce better quality work. In the end, it did. I started writing for fun, and I created several pieces that I actually liked.

Of everything that I have ever written, my favorite is probably a short story entitled “The Disease.” Ironically, “The Disease” is a comedy that was born from a nightmare—a nightmare in the form of an English teacher who somehow managed to make me feel guilty for not writing in my spare time. I still haven’t figured out how she accomplished this seemingly impossible feat. Maybe it was in the look that she gave me, the look that always made me feel as though I had done something wrong. Maybe all English teachers are just endowed with superpowers. If that is the case, I am disappointed—I have yet to see any of them fight evil comic book villains. Whatever the case, she somehow managed to convince me that not writing would be a major crime.

So, I wrote. She read some of my works with a critical eye before telling me that they could have been more creative. I was exasperated. First, she had told me to write. Then, she told me to write well. I wished that she could make up her mind. Her confidence in my ability to do both seemed astonishingly misplaced.

Perhaps I had better start at the beginning. I took Mrs. Wierzbicki's class during my freshman year of high school, and, at the time, I hated it. Sometimes, I could have sworn that she was put on this Earth with the sole purpose of watching us suffer. She incorporated the Internet into the classroom work, she made us take notes and write essays, and she thought of highly creative projects, which, if I hadn't been so stressed about my grade, I might have actually enjoyed. She told us to complete group assignments, discuss serious issues, hold Socratic seminars, and make portfolios at the end of each semester. It was obvious to everybody but me that she herself was working hard to make us into better students. She bent over backwards to give us opportunities to improve. It was obvious to me that she just hated us all. I was tired of hearing her say, "As soon as you enter this classroom, I expect you to be working," or, "Come on guys; I want you to be creative." Nothing I did ever seemed to be enough to satisfy her.

It came as a surprise, therefore, when she complimented one of my essays. She suggested that I write more often, even outside the classroom. Of course, I was able to recognize that she was only trying to trick me into doing more work. Fortunately, I didn't fall for it. It took her the better part of two years to convince me to write for fun, and once she did, I discovered that writing was something I actually enjoyed doing. Since then, she has been a good friend and a remarkable influence. She is one of my favorite critics, especially since it was she who first gave me the self-confidence to pursue writing as a career. Unfortunately, as much as I loved writing, it was (and still is) difficult to find the motivation to begin. She would encourage me to write something unique, but the only things that I would manage to create were excuses not to be creative. With my somewhat skewed logic, I reasoned that the longer I waited to get started, the less work—or writing, in this case—I would actually have to do.

I started writing “The Disease” after school one day last year. I had passed Mrs. Wierzbicki in the hallway that morning, and I had had to inform her, yet again, that I hadn’t written anything new lately. Normally, such a pronouncement would cause her to give me the same evil glare that petrified me as a freshman. Mrs. Wierzbicki can look unbelievably scary when she is angry, and her dark red hair does nothing to help with this image. On that particular day, however, she hadn’t needed to make me feel guilty: I felt guilty enough without her help. I wanted to be a good writer, but I knew that I could never get good unless I devoted much more time and effort to writing. I had lost count of the number of times she had encouraged me to write something that was entirely my own, and suddenly, I found that I wanted nothing more than to do just that.

That afternoon, strengthened with a new resolve, I turned on the computer, opened a blank Word document . . . and promptly came down with writer’s block. One half hour, two cups of tea, and four Solitaire games later, I still had writer’s block. That was when it hit me: If writer’s block was all I could think of, then I would write about it. To that end, I imagined a very silly storyline. I envisioned writer’s block as this serious illness that affected innocent teenaged girls who only wanted to do their homework. Since there is no such thing as a teenaged girl who actually wants to do her homework, this was obviously fiction.

I wrote about a teenaged girl who was largely patterned after some of my friends. This girl had a twin brother who constantly pestered her. I have never had a twin, but I have often wanted one. When I was little, I used to be angry at my older brother, Paul, for not having been born as my twin sister. I hadn’t realized at the time that he had had no control over that. While all writing provides me the opportunity to live vicariously through my characters, it is only in the wonderful realm of fiction that I can take liberties with the actual situations. Because of this, I decided to compromise and give her a twin brother. Her brother has a very different personality than my own brother has,

but somehow, he still wound up being annoying. I have yet to figure out how. Maybe that particular ability is a skill that all brothers intrinsically know. I named my characters Joy and Lyles, after the screen names my brother and I used on a mutual friend's RPG website.

Joy glared at him. "What do you want?"

"I heard you talking," Lyles replied in a matter-of-fact tone. "Talking to yourself is the first sign of insanity."

"No," she replied. She looked at him with coolly, a hint of a smirk tugging at the corner of her mouth. "Living with you is the first sign of insanity."

"So you admit you're crazy?"

What excited me the most about this story was the fact that I could have banter between the siblings. This would give me the chance to write dialogue in the story, which was something at which I had had very little practice. The story's driving conflict, of course, was the girl's writer's block.

"It's not that I couldn't write a story—"

"Per se."

"—I just ran into . . . technical difficulties."

He raised an eyebrow. "Hmm . . . Like a plot?"

She nodded, trying to keep her dignity. "Something like that, I suppose."

The story itself was not very difficult to write. Since I already had the characters, I just waited for them to say something funny. I imagined the sort of emotions that they would experience and the pranks that they would pull, and I wrote about how they interacted with each other. While none of the characters are exactly like actual people, I was still able to poke fun at my brother, simply because my character had borrowed Paul's pseudonym. Naturally, if I had written any story

about a teenaged girl with a brother, people would make the connection between the two of us, regardless of how much (or how little) we had in common with the characters.

My characters surprised me by turning out radically different from how I had intended them to be. When I first began writing this story, I had intended to mimic myself and my brother. However, by the time I was done, Joy and Lyles had blossomed into unique people with personalities all their own. Perhaps there are some similarities between me and my character, but if so, then they are only subtle nuances that none but close family can discover. I had often heard published authors say that their characters had taken over their stories and done things that surprised even the writers. It wasn't until after I wrote this story that I fully understood those statements. The disadvantage to such understanding is that I am now obliged to forgive J. K. Rowling for killing Sirius Black. I'd prefer to remain in denial rather than acknowledge his untimely demise. Sometimes, ignorance really is bliss.

As the story started to take shape, I felt a rush of excitement in the pit of my stomach. I was creating something new, something that I had hoped others would enjoy. After I finished the first draft, I felt more lighthearted than I had in a long time. I was relieved to have completed something so unique, and I had trouble believing that I had done it all on my own. To this day, I cannot understand why I felt as though I needed to write such a story, which is neither serious nor true. Perhaps, since I am normally a serious, over-analytical person, I needed some form of comic relief. The story, of course, is rather stupid, but if it makes people laugh, then it is not completely useless. I wish I could say the same for my brother.

Once I had accepted writing as an important aspect of my life, certain things about me began to change. When I read books for pleasure, I analyzed the way the authors pieced together their storylines. All of my experiences suddenly became possible writing material, and I became

more articulate when describing my thoughts or beliefs. I had always enjoyed reading, and I relished the idea of writing things for others to read. I liked sharing my imagination, ideas, and humor with other people, even if no one but family members would ever get the chance to read them. In addition, my choice to study writing in college has given my life a bit more direction. I had never before decided on a career, but upon finding something I liked so much, I had a clearer idea of the path my life was going to take. My parents were thrilled with my decision, and my friends have been nothing but supportive.

“The Disease” is not the Great American Novel by any stretch of the imagination. It isn’t even the Great American Short Story. It is neither my best nor my first attempt at fiction, and it certainly isn’t my funniest work. Still, for reasons I have yet to comprehend, it is my favorite original piece of writing. Perhaps I just find the characters more entertaining, or maybe I feel as if I can relate to them. It’s possible that I enjoy rereading my first real attempt at writing dialogue. In all honesty, I don’t know why I like this story the best. But if I were to ask Mrs. Wierzbicki, she could probably tell me: Some things never change.