

The Right Moment

It's 7:45 in the morning, and it's cold. The hallway to the gym is long, and seems like it will never end. Sticky red and black bleachers groan as I climb to the highest corner, where you can almost touch the ceiling and there's a crack in between the cheap plastic and the wall. It's middle school, it's a Monday, and, unlike most of the eleven-to-fifteen year olds packed into this gym, I'm not totally miserable to be here.

Erin is waiting for me when I reach the top. On his lap is a composition notebook. It is around the time when the composition notebook people are trying to get creative with the designs, so it has this black and grey houndstooth pattern on the cover. We have marked up the front with stars and flowers and our names in "artistic" (messy) cursive and big block letters. Holes have been punched through the cardboard with ink pens and all of the typed print on the front has been bubbled in. This notebook is dirty, old, falling apart, and kind of gross, but, for the two of us, it's the Holy Grail.

He'd taken the notebook home last night, so I would get it in periods one and two, and then return it to him in the third period that we shared. We'd pass it back and forth during fourth period and lunch, he'd have it for sixth and seventh, and then he'd hand it to me on the bus to take home. What he'd written last night picked up on the end of our texting stream, which filled in the gaps between what we had written at school yesterday, and what we will write today. We love the system almost as much as we love the writing itself, and have written it all out in detail in the SCHEDULE section inside the front cover (knowing, of course, that the weekdays would rotate depending on whether the week ended on a me day or an Erin day).

“You’re not going to believe how it went down with Matthew.” Erin says, handing it over. “It gets pretty ugly.”

“I’m sure it did,” I reply, “I wouldn’t expect less. I think Amelia is going to try to break out of her engagement but I don’t know how yet. I might throw together some drabbles¹ in Math and see how it goes.”

“Sounds great.” He says, “It kind of fits what I’ve got going on. Oh, warning, it’s long.”

The bell rings. It is long, what he’s written, almost six pages. That was the best thing about the notebooks, which had originated in the snippets of story we would text back and forth since we first got phones. Where the texts are short, great for conversations and quick action, the notebooks are broad, allowing us to know our characters better. As I walk to class, I read, looking up only when I absolutely have to.

To me, Erin is the best writer in the world. His characters are deep and interesting, full of passion for their causes and speeches that shake audiences to the bones. His prose dances with dialogue and he loves to tie in real history to everything he writes. He pushes me to be better, as I do for him. Each scene we share is a contest of who can take it the furthest. When our characters argue it’s like we’re playing Jenga, each of us stacking tension higher and higher until one of us lands on the exact words to make it all come crumbling down. We loved to write arguments.

That’s not what he’s written today, though.

Matthew, Erin’s perspective character, is trapped, and has just been tortured by soldiers from the other side. He’s weak. He’s injured, but he’s craftily planning his escape. He’s got only a day to do it, and he can see the light fading under the door of the barn, cut by the shadows of

¹ A piece of writing about 100 words in length to “sketch out” a character or scene idea.

enemy soldiers' feet just outside. He can hear the beginning of a celebration, a wedding for the enemy leader's daughter (a young woman named Amelia who serves as my perspective character). He's crossed paths with her before, but this is early in the story so their acquaintance is tense, untrusting, and only a shade kinder than straight-up hostile. He can tell she pities him, but he doesn't want her pity. Erin has ended with shouting and the barn door opening. I get to pick who's on the other side. I pull a gel pen from my bag, lay the notebook on my lap under my desk, and Amelia steps into the barn.

I slipped in between the doors and closed them quickly behind me. Tied to a column in the middle of the barn was the rebel's son. He looked up at me, and I registered what I thought was surprise, but as bruised as he was it was difficult to tell. When I met his eyes, they were as cold and blue as the metal of a gun, and twice as full of fire.

"What do you want?" He asked, his voice raw, but angry.

"A trade," I said. "I'm getting married in an hour. Martin has a temper I haven't known a match for. I'll be dead in a month or I'll wish it if I don't run. Tomorrow morning my father is having you hanged for treason."

"What's your point? We're both dead?" He said, watching me look over my shoulder as I slid a knife from the sleeve of my dress.

"Your freedom for mine." I said, slicing through the ropes around his wrists. "At the beginning of the ceremony, the guards will switch shifts. They'll be drunk already and they'll likely be late. Wait until you hear music, then sneak out the back door. Go into the woods and then run as fast and as far as you can. When they realize you've gone, all hell breaks loose and I get away in the commotion."

"Why me?"

"Because you are convenient to me right now and I guess I would feel bad if you died."

"How sweet." He said, but he smiled. I could tell he was enjoying the scheme.

"I cannot stay longer." I said, "Good luck."

I gathered myself, trying to seem less like I had just brokered a deal with a traitor and more like I had handled business for my father. The guards nodded to me as I stepped out.

I knew he could double cross me, but I also knew that he wouldn't. He might have been a traitor, but he was an honest man, and proud of it. He'd hold to his word.

The sky was orange, the air warm. I was still getting used to the weather on this side of the world. As I watched the sun set, I felt as if I were watching sand drizzle out of an hourglass. All I had to do now was wait.

I write in bursts, in between worksheets or under the table during class discussions.

Battered though it may be, it's still a plain composition book, so I always figure my teachers

think that I'm working on something. There's problems with it that I can't decide how to fix. Is the plan too contrived? Do Matthew and Amelia even know each other well enough for her to trust him yet? Should I have described her dress? How badly injured is Matthew actually, especially since I went and revolved the whole scheme around him *running* through the woods? I do not edit. Erin and I have written variation after variation of this scene and others, and with every iteration we get closer to the best way to handle this pivotal point in Matthew and Amelia's story. Whatever doesn't work now will just get omitted the next time we cycle around to the escape.

Where Matthew is loud, passionate, and brave, Amelia is sneaky and secretive, looking for subtle ways to undermine the powers that be. She has disguises and alter egos, and when she finally joins the rebellion, she gets to be the valuable spy and reference point that helps to bring the enemy down. I love stepping into her mind, playing the ice to Erin's fire.

This process is how I come to play with contrast in my writing, learning adaptability and improv. I learn that there is such a thing as "over-description." We serve each other's plots and support each other's character arcs. We write in paragraphs of prose, dialogue, and letters. I learn how to manipulate each one, how to delete what doesn't work and how to find something that does. I learn which words mean what I am really trying to say and which ones are just placeholders. Much farther down the line, I learn that I am more comfortable in the third person, and that my work will read as more mature because of it. Best of all, I learn how to work quickly to a deadline (*lots and lots* of deadlines), even if nothing I write is perfect or even good.

We passed around that notebook for about four years. We had other stories too, and Matthew and Amelia gave way to Mickey and Chaz, Rudolph and Micha. Rebels became

time-travellers and circus performers. We sought the obscure, the fantastic, and the genuine. Our writing styles bled into each other's and to this day I sometimes can't tell who wrote what on a certain story.

We changed a lot, Erin and I. We fell out in high school and lost touch. Every now and then we talk and we remember. I still write. Essays, mostly, as they come up, but for myself now and then, too. I can never shake the influence of the notebooks in my own writing. It's true that without our shared practice, neither of us would be the writer we are today. It was just difficult, once it was all over, to realize that, in spite of everything I had learned with Erin, I only really knew how to write half of a story. I don't have someone waiting for me to finish, so I almost never do. Dialogue got more difficult when I looked up and realized I was talking to myself. I write the same words over and over, because without feedback I become so critical of my work that I feel like I can't move to the next scene until I've gotten this one just right.

There are moments when I tap into it. I'll be up late at night and I'll be thinking so much about a character that I open up Pages and let them breathe. I give them titles like "The Ravens" or "Asphodel Garden" and I'll write out of some myth I can't get out of my head or start over on a story I've tried to write a million times before. I'll go for days on it, a thousand words, three thousand, until I lose the magic and it fizzles. My laptop and flash drives read like graveyards of abandoned drafts. I still love it when I can find it and I hope to finish a real manuscript someday, but for now I'm still trapped in procrastination and perfectionism.

I hope I break out someday, find whatever it was in myself that gave me Amelia and hold on to it. Maybe I will, but right now I'm watching the sun set over a barn in a world I don't know well enough yet, still waiting for the right moment.