

## The Writer

By

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The furious clicking of the keyboard sounded throughout the house as Brandon finished what he claimed would be his best work yet. The rain spattering lightly on the windows worked in counterpoint to the machine-gun bursts coming from behind his office door, creating a pleasant backdrop as Katie sat on the faded blue loveseat in the living room, sipping her coffee and reading one of the books she'd checked out from the library. With only half an hour to go before she needed to get ready for the nightshift at the motel, she was anxious to get through at least one more chapter

A brief silence issued from the hallway, followed by the soft sounds of the LaserJet giving life to formerly blank pages. She knew what was coming, so her eyes moved greedily down the pages as she heard the office door open. He came down the hallway at an eager trot, and she glanced up to see the gleam in his eyes. She knew she wouldn't be able to tell him 'no', even before he asked.

"Katie, would you um..." The nervous excitement was evident in his voice; he sounded like a little kid asking to go out and play too late at a friend's house. "Do you think I could get you to proofread my story?" He indicated a modest stack of papers in his hand. She smiled at him; she knew that "proofread" was his euphemism for "read it and tell me I'm not wasting my time, no matter how bad it is, but do it honestly."

"Of course honey, here." He dropped the story into her outstretched hand and walked quickly outside for a cigarette. She could see him just outside the rain speckled window, clouds of smoke billowing past his head, as he paced nervously like an expectant father in a hospital waiting room.

She thumbed through the stack to gauge the length of his two weeks worth of

effort; ten pages, 12 point font, single spaced. Definitely his *longest* so far. She turned back to the first page and started reading.

Brandon had taken up writing as a hobby a month or so ago, and he loved doing it—she could see that, and she encouraged it. Unfortunately, he had all of the writing ability of a brick, and some of the short science fiction stories he'd penned might have been better if they *had* been written by inanimate masonry.

Katie felt bad for thinking this about something he took such obvious pride in, but she couldn't help it—he was terrible. Brandon's characters were thinner than the paper they were printed on, leaving little more than a name up to the imagination. His ability to drown any cohesive storyline with adjectives was matched only by an uncanny lack of concern for any plot devices that might catch a reader's interest, like, for example, dialogue.

With little else to do during her long night shift behind the motel's counter, Katie read an average of two decently-sized novels a week, so she had an idea of what was “good” writing and what wasn't. She figured that with a couple of years of hard work, Brandon might be able to get away with writing a review for a book on a second-rate website, working his way up to bigger things, like reviews on Amazon.com. She hated herself for thinking this way, and as much as she loved him, she almost hated him for making her feel it.

By the time her eyes found the heralded words “The End” at the middle of the last page, she'd come to the conclusion that the extra room for detail ten pages gave him would've been put to better use had it been left blank. He apparently had been watching her read, as the door opened only moments after she set the story down. Katie saw the anxious look in Brandon's eyes and her heart sank; she couldn't lie to him about it anymore.

“So, whatcha think? Better?” He shuffled from side to side, trying to both warm up from the cold rain and expend his nervous energy.

“Well, yeah,” she said cautiously. It was technically true, like saying three-day-old fish didn't smell as bad as four-day-old fish. It was essentially the same story as

the last three he'd written—alien invasion, humanity enslaved, a couple falls in love against all odds. As Joe Friday might've said, only the names had been changed, to protect the innocent from any continuing embarrassment his pen would bring them. His wanting expression drove a tinge of pain into her heart, and she sighed heavily.

“Look, Brandon, you have potential; you could be a great writer. But these alien stories, they're just...it's just not happening.” She glanced at the clock to take a break from the pain in his eyes; she was running late now. “Crap, I need to get ready. Why don't you try a different story? Try writing what you know.” She gave him a kiss as she walked to the bathroom to start her nightly ritual of makeup and fighting her short, brunette hair.

His mental thesaurus could've probably found thirty different words and phrases to make it sound more romantic, but “disappointed” worked well enough. It wasn't quite a strong enough word—heartbroken, crestfallen, dispirited, all of those felt a little closer—but disappointment was still what it boiled down to. He walked back to his office after she left, trying not to *sulk*, or *mope*, or anything else he'd have one of his cookie-cutter characters do at such a time. He closed the word processor program, the cursor still flashing at the end of his latest attempt, and started up a game of solitaire, the only other program he knew how to use other than the standard web browser and email client (neither of which he really knew how to use very well, but he could do what he needed with them.)

He was still playing as she hurried in forty-five minutes later and gave him a quick kiss goodbye. He played long after he heard the door shut and her car pull out. He played for quite some time altogether that night, just staring at the green tableau and the sequences of red and black, thinking of—not pondering, or contemplating, or analyzing—what she'd said.

*Write what you know* her voice kept repeating in his mind.

*I don't know anything, not to write about anyways.*

*Well, get to know something then.* This was a different voice, not quite hers and not

quite his. A little of both, but still unique, seeming to come from somewhere else entirely.

*Get to know something*, it repeated as he fell asleep, staring at the green pixels on the screen.

Brandon woke the next morning to the sounds of the garbage being picked up, indicating it to be slightly after nine A.M. He stretched painfully as he realized he'd fallen asleep at his desk, apparently writing given the amount of text on the word processor application in front of him. He glanced sleepily around the room, yawning, trying to get his brain started. He stopped glancing.

He hadn't *done* any further writing last night; he'd spent all night playing solitaire. He looked back at the text on the screen—still there, and definitely not any of his previous work. The number at the bottom of the screen told him there were eight pages of new material here. He took a quick glance through a few pages and then printed it.

*It must be an old story I wanted to go over before bed*, he assured himself under the buzzing whir of the printer. *Has to be*. The printer stopped and he took the pages as he leaned back in his chair. His eyes grew wide as he read.

It was definitely something new, and definitely his best work ever, although he didn't feel as though he was reading his own writing. Hell, it was actually damned good writing, better than a lot of the short stories he'd read online in the past month or so as he "studied the market" in Katie's words. But the quality of the writing was only partially what surprised him; the content of the story shocked him even more.

Unlike his normal, cheesy sci-fi fare, the pages in his hands contained a rather erotic story, something he had never even considered writing. The plot—two strangers meeting in an online chat room, then having an affair—was something straight from a mid-budget skin flick, but the writing was superb. Just enough detail to keep the story flowing, but not so much as to be tacky. The characters were developed as well as eight pages would allow; the man bearing much resemblance to

Brandon himself (something he'd tried to do several times when working on a lead male, failing miserably each time), the woman a striking young blonde fresh out of college. By the time he read the last words he was not only aroused, but finishing the story left him feeling a little empty, like he was saying goodbye to a couple of new friends.

He grinned slyly. *Katie might like this, Brandon*, he thought to himself. *She might really like this.* The grin thickened—of course she would; they had similar tastes in the bedroom, so if he got something out of it, she certainly would. And besides, she always seemed to get a kick out of those “trashy sex novels” she got at the supermarket.

He looked at the clock on the computer. Nine-thirty-four A.M. She got off work at eight, and was normally home and in bed within forty-five minutes. She might be a little miffed at him for waking her, but as he glanced back over some of the steamier scenes, he knew it would be a short-lived anger that the story (and aftermath) would easily compensate for. He got up and walked quietly towards the bedroom.

She lay huddled completely under the covers, breathing steadily and slowly as he silently stepped into the room. She didn't stir as he closed the door, nor did she move as he lay down on top of the covers next to her. He placed his arm around her slowly rising shoulder and called her name softly.

“Katie? Katie, hon, wake up.”

Muffled grunting and sleep-noise was the only response. He tried harder, shaking her gently this time.

“Katie, sweetheart, wake up. I want to show you something.” Her breathing became lighter; he could tell she was awake. He pulled the cover back, exposing Katie's long, soft blonde hair, and leaned in to kiss her neck.

He stopped himself. Katie's brown hair was short. He stared stupidly at the back of this strange sheet hair for a moment as his mind fumbled on the brink of

realization, teetering towards an epiphany he knew was too obvious for him to grasp. As he tried to get his mental transmission into gear, the stranger stretched and sat up. She turned to him and yawned sleepily, then flashed a mischievous grin at him.

“Hey you, thanks for last night; that was great.”

“Uh...um...you’re welcome?” He was confused to put it mildly; other words such as flabbergasted and befuddled sprang to mind as well. She ran a red fingernail down his shirt.

“Do you want to prove to me that it wasn’t just a dream?”

“Wha...what are you talking about? Who are you?”

“Yes,” a cold voice from the door said. “What *are* you talking about, and who are you? I’d like to know too.”

Brandon’s heart fell through the floor with an almost audible crash as he looked over to see Katie standing in the doorway.

Tears streamed down Katie’s face as she sat in the motel bed that evening, trying to stir up the nerve to get ready for work. She still couldn’t believe Brandon had brought some strange girl home to their bed. That was the worst part, she thought; it would’ve been one thing for him to fool around, but he didn’t have to bring it home. She wiped her cheeks dry and started towards the small bathroom.

Katie had cursed him nine ways from Sunday as her mom would’ve said, then grabbed her makeup and left, all while the bimbo was getting dressed and Brandon was chasing after her, swearing he didn’t know what was going on. His audacity on that part still amazed her. A naked girl in their bed, while Katie had been at work (working late, even), Brandon sitting next blondie as she tried to get the ball rolling again, and he didn’t know what was happening? How stupid did he think she was?

She could’ve made him leave, and probably should have—it was technically her lease they were living under anyways. But Katie was exhausted, angry, and hurt, and the thought of falling asleep in that bed made her skin crawl. Not knowing where she was going, she got into her truck and drove.

Katie ended up back at the motel, and was lucky enough to get one of the rooms for half price—perks of being a night clerk, she thought sardonically as the day cashier handed her the key. Too tired to dwell any further, she went straight to the freshly made bed and passed out. The clerk gave her the wake up call she requested right on time, and she sat up in bed as the tears began anew.

Her hair put up surprisingly little resistance to her attempts to manage it, and as she was putting on her eyeliner there was a knock at the door. Her heart both raced hopefully and plummeted with an angry sadness as she knew who would be standing on the other side. And, as she knew she would in spite of all logic telling her not to, she let Brandon in, telling herself that she wanted to at least be able to say she tried to fix things.

Brandon woke with a stiff back and an ache in his neck as he sat up in his rather uncomfortable office chair. He soon forgot his pain though, washing it away with a brief wave of confusion—he knew perfectly well he had fallen asleep in bed, and somehow he had ended up fully dressed and in the office. He'd even gone to bed fairly early, having tried to drink away the strange incident he found himself mysteriously party to yesterday morning. Perhaps he'd had more to drink than he thought, he figured, until he saw the computer monitor.

Just like yesterday, there was text on the screen that he hadn't written. His heart sank. What trouble did he get himself into this time? Scared to look, but wanting to prepare himself in case there might be some new stranger in the house that he should know about, he printed the writing—only seven pages this time—and braced himself.

Reading the first few pages, his heart leaped. Again, it was much better writing than he'd ever done before, and this time it was a romantic short he'd typed into the word processor. The protagonist, a thirty-something black man this time (although otherwise an almost carbon copy of Brandon himself yet again) was longing for his wife as she sat alone in a motel room across town. She had caught him red handed

with another woman and left him as he tried in vain to calm her down.

What got Brandon's hopes up, however, was that the man in the story—Wesley—had gone to his wife's motel room, where much to both Brandon and Wesley's surprise, she had let him in. They talked about what had happened, and she relented, willing to give him another chance since it had been his "first offense" as she put it.

He felt almost giddy with hope as he set the story down. If he had written out the details of an unremembered affair and it had proven to be true, surely he could have acted out *this* scene at Katie's hotel. The parallels between himself and Wesley, the situation both men faced, and Katie and Desiree—Wesley's significant other—were all too obvious to be mere unimaginative writing. Especially in light of yesterday's fiasco.

He looked at the clock on the computer, and anxious to see what his night had accomplished, called Katie's cell phone. She should be on her way home by now—if she was coming home, that is—and he needed to hear her voice tell him everything was going to be alright.

His wish was only partially granted, as her voice told him to leave his message and phone number after the tone. He wasn't terribly surprised; she hated talking on the cell when she drove, and she might not even be finished at work. Wouldn't be the first time she'd had to cover for the day clerk running late. Of course, these were rationalizations that were only partially concealing what he really thought was going on—that she'd seen the caller id on the phone and just didn't want to talk to him. He didn't want to let himself think that, but it poked at the back of his mind like a cruel little kid who's found a sharp stick and a small, furry animal to torment.

Brandon left a quick "Hey, it's me, give me a call when you can," and hung up the phone as he went back to the computer. He saved the story (as "Love Story—Wesley" for lack of a better title) and closed it, only to find another copy of the word processor open behind it. *Wow, busy night last night* he thought with surprised amusement. He set the computer to print the new story as he went to the kitchen and

poured himself a cup of coffee.

The new story was a bit longer, nine pages this time, and once again better written than anything he normally did. An icy chill countered the warmth of the coffee as he read through it.

“Look buddy, I don’t have time for this.” The burly desk sergeant rifled through a stack of papers. “I’m sorry about your wife—really, I am—but I’ve got too much crap on my desk as it is without turning a regular accident into something out of the *Twilight Zone*. If you want to confess to something, then do it. Otherwise...” he nodded to the papers on his desk, “let me take care of the *real* crimes.”

The tone of his voice told Brandon that, sorry or not, the sergeant didn’t want anything further to do with the case. And why should he? Katie’s car had run a red light and become a Peterbilt’s hood ornament. The truck was moving a little over the speed limit, she had her cell phone in her hand, one ticket to the trucker for speeding, and everyone goes on about their lives. Well, everyone except for Katie of course.

Brandon thanked the sergeant and walked out. He could come back anytime if he wanted to, but he wouldn’t get anything done with the indifference behind the badge he was looking at now. He drove home as it started raining, thinking of the story he’d written.

It had been a dark piece, told first person by a slightly deranged, nameless narrator. It reminded him greatly of Poe’s *The Tell-Tale Heart*, or *The Cask of Amontillado*, and was similar in its plot as well. Having suffered countless emotional and psychological injuries, all of which were trivialities at best but slanted to where the reader would be sympathetic to the narrator, the protagonist sought revenge on his likewise nameless abuser. Unlike Poe, the “villain” in this case was a beautiful woman, portrayed as cruel and vicious, although taking any of the claimed assaults objectively, the reader would likely see them as normal interaction, if not loving affection or mere playfulness at worst. Had Brandon not been horrified at the obvious direction the story would take, he would’ve been greatly impressed by his

ability (if it *was* his, that is) to twist such mundane actions into something that would guarantee a reader's outrage at the poor treatment of the narrator.

The story was modernized from any nineteenth century gothic inspiration it may have had however. Instead of encasing the antagonist in brick or sneaking into a pitch black bedroom with a dark lantern, the narrator turned to a more current method of covertly revenging himself. He found the car belonging to the victim-abuser at the parking lot of her work one night, and with a small pocket knife, made two small incisions in the brake lines. His work completed, he crept away through the shadows to patiently await news of his success at home.

Brandon arrived home from the police station while the rain was coming down in sheets. He didn't know what to do; he was exhausted from the day's emotions, but scared to sleep from fear of what stories the next morning would show him. He went inside unhurriedly as the rain drenched him, and grabbed a bottle of Glenlivet off the top of the refrigerator. He took two drinks straight from the bottle and then grabbed a tumbler from the cabinet. He filled the short glass and drained it in a single, large gulp.

Falling asleep on his feet, more so now with the alcohol warming his blood, Brandon walked to the bedroom. He stopped in the hall bathroom and grabbed the bottle of sleeping pills Katie had bought just a couple of days ago. He knew alcohol and sedatives were an unwise combination, but he figured the pills would either kill him or keep him in bed for the night, either prospect appealing to his exhausted, guilt and grief riddled mind. He took three and swallowed them dry before continuing back to the empty bedroom. Within moments of hitting the pillow, he was asleep.

It was several minutes before Brandon realized he was conscious, staring intently at the computer screen as though the answers to all of life's mysteries lay hidden in its pixels. He saw words flying onto the screen, easily faster than he normally typed, and from the bottom corner of his eye he could see his hands flying around the keyboard. Strangely, he could see his fingers typing in a blur, but could

feel nothing from them. No sense of motion, no sensation of the pads of his fingers hitting the keys. He could feel a strange tugging sensation in the palms of his hands, as if someone had tied an invisible line around the cluster of small bones inside, holding tightly to the other end while experiencing a modest epileptic fit.

Suddenly, his hands quit moving and he could feel a burning tightness in his forearms. He looked up at the screen and saw the cursor flashing after the words “The End.” With trepidation, Brandon grabbed the mouse with his right hand, and scrolled up to the beginning of the story. He gasped in horror as he read through the first pages.

By the time he reached the last page, his horror had dwindled. He *had* to have written the other stories after the fact—the details were too clear to have been prophetic. He scrolled up again and reread it, then again, all in disbelief. Even as he felt the tugging again in his left hand, as he felt his fingers wrap around the handle of the revolver he hadn’t seen on the desk and hadn’t owned before tonight, he couldn’t believe what he was reading would come true.

His eyes ran again over the paragraph where the lonely protagonist chambered a hollow-point round in a military issue, semi-automatic pistol and took the picture of his recently deceased wife in his hands for the last time. As the nameless character shed a single, final tear which silently fell onto the glass of the picture, the soft *click-snick* of the hammer pulling back came to Brandon’s ears from another world, like the imagined conversations he never could put to words in the stories he’d tried writing. He could feel the cold, heartless steel press against his head, and could feel his finger start to tighten. He wasn’t afraid. Terrified, horrified, petrified yes, but even those words fell far short from the mark as his thesaurus burst into overdrive.

Brandon’s eyes passed through the lines where the poor soul he’d created pulled the trigger, and crossed over the words “The End” as the roar from his own revolver made its way from the chamber down the barrel. Even in its frantic, hyperactive state, Brandon’s thesaurus could find no words to describe the situation in the fraction of a second the bullet took to travel from the chamber through his skull.

There was a soft thud as the revolver fell from Brandon's slack fingers onto the carpet. The cursor blinked ignorantly after the final words for a moment, and then with the soft clicking of unseen fingers pressing the keys, it moved down two lines and centered itself. After a slight pause, during which the revolver slowly faded to nothing, the clicking continued, slowly typing out two further words.

*For Now.*