

Chapter One

At? I clutch their trite little manuscripts in my hand, stacked neatly on top of my own in order of appearance, suggesting that I'm studious and interested and not in any hurry to get to my own. I'm scheduled to go last tonight, which is good or bad depending on the mood I'm in. It's good because when I go first I get so pissed off about the feedback that I can't focus for the rest of the night, except to randomly and spitefully attack the work of the others. It's bad because by going last, I'm going to be brooding over my imagined responses to the ripping I expect to receive if the group gets to my handout before we all run out of time and patience.

← I've perused the other's drafts during the week, on the bus, over lunch, whenever I can squeeze in a few minutes of their tortured prose. There are six of us would-be writers in the group, but only three hand out regularly, which helps. The irregulars, who are closer to non-writers in practice, have an easier job of it. Instead of scraping together the requisite 10 or 20 lame pages a week they stockpile reasons why they haven't. There are no limits or rules around what constitutes a good excuse. We're talking pre-writers block here and if the weather, or a cold, or your children or your spouse, or car trouble or some sporting event or some babysitter problem has prevented you from writing, well, no one can prove you can't write. You just haven't actually gotten around to it. Those of us who write regularly compensate for those who don't, and the quasi-literary deadbeats are happy to have something to read and critique, secure in the knowledge that they can do better as soon as they have some time, as soon as the

mood is right and they feel properly inspired. And maybe too, the shame of never handing out pales when compared with the harsh and inevitable fate of being exposed as a shitty writer.

Of course I always begin each week with a sharp pencil, an open mind and every intention of carefully and critically reading each and every word of my classmate's arduous and awkward stabs at authorship. I fill the margins with encouragement and appropriate comments, careful to praise as much as I criticize, if it's humanly possible. I do this for the first few pages anyway, and then gradually lose interest, leaving the last two thirds of the manuscript blank, then scribble obvious and inane comments on the back page like, "this is a good start, I'm eager to see where the story goes," or "don't worry about the first draft being perfect; get your ideas down and edit later." I realize on the way to class every week that I've done a half-assed job with the homework, that everyone is on to me, that they must know I despise their pathetic attempts at competent verse and only show up each week to prove my own literary superiority. I study their reactions each Thursday evening, looking for some indication that I've wounded them, that they're limping off to die somewhere, but they keep coming back for more, as if like me, they remain convinced of the intrinsic value of their own work in the face of all evidence to the contrary. Perhaps I've been too kind to this point.

I'm the fourth to arrive at the coffee shop, taking inventory of who's shown up, ready or not. My eyes rest on Rebecca. Beautiful, bitter, and blocked, she is by far the least productive and best looking of the female members. Although she's promised a million times to hand something out, she's again e-mailed just hours ahead to indicate that chapter two of her scathing account of her first and last marriage will have to wait

yet another week because her 8 year old boy has terminal allergies, lives in an oxygen tent, at least in her book, and requires around the clock intensive care, a situation her ex is somehow responsible for, along with a host of crimes we'll be hearing about in detail during recess. Class is her only respite from it all, and from time to time she manages to temporarily overcome her domestic situation and actually participates in the discussion.

run-away sentence

John, sitting next to her, whose pen name is currently Robert Allan Jacobs (he's convinced that serious writers need at least three names but can never settle on the winning combo), has been concerned with issues of libel and also hasn't handed out for weeks. We know his book is entitled *The Waltz of Retribution* and half the class suspect he's using us as characters, but we need more evidence to convict. He is the class expert on the international publishing conspiracy against which there is no hope for the likes of us, and usually speaks in hushed and vague tones to Karl, the instructor pre-class before taking his place among the unwritten. Karen, who sits attempting to make small talk with the others, is ambitious by contrast, and looking to redefine the modern romance from a feminist-lesbian perspective. Her book takes place in a small college town where the love that dares not speak its name is sure to cause a stir, set as it is in the distant late 70's of her own militant co-ed odyssey.

(did you tell us about this title?... sounds familiar!)

of

for a conviction

We sip our drinks as the others file in, dropping their book bags at our back table and heading for the counter. "How's little Joshua?" I inquire of Rebecca, who appears, yet again, to be in some sort of post car-crash shock. She's dressed as always in a loose fitting sweater and long pleated skirt which I'm convinced hides a comely and neglected body. I wonder if she shaves...anything.

"We were at the emergency room four times this week," she says staring past me

at someone or something else.

"That's rough," I say, "what happened?"

"His bastard father fed him peanut butter cookies last weekend. He knows Josh is allergic. I could have him charged with attempted murder."

"Is he OK now?" I ask.

"He's with the sitter, sedated, I'm hoping I can get through the session."

Rebecca's cell phone sits face-up and standing by on the table next to her chai.

"So, not getting much writing done."

Rebecca now turns her gaze towards me, managing a smile of resignation which registers as foreplay in contrast to her typical mood. Her softly curled and messy hair half-covers her face like she's just gotten out of bed and her attractiveness, which has only grown on me over time, is particularly evident. She's by now quite used to the rhetorical nature of my comments. "You need so much editing I haven't had time for my own," she says, nodding towards what I recognize as the remains of my handout which now resembles a coffee and ink stained murder scene. Her red pen has been busy, no doubt an indirect result of the intensity of her personal life.

The mutual admiration society of Anna, Kellie, and Karl, our default literary guru, now [✂]graces us with their presence. Anna and Kellie, no match for Rebecca with their butch hair-dos and post-natal spreads, are writing identical accounts of strong women who have grown up in small towns and now ^{who} must navigate the rocky waters of the big city, gifted kids, and pathologically indifferent husbands. They are both apparently in love with Karl, and vie for his attention. Karl, perhaps sensing an opportunity for a three-way, allows the smug soccer mom^s to believe that their domestic chronicles might someday, and with the

right coaching, of course, be the stuff of great literature. Karl should know, because he has an MFA from Iowa in creative writing, whatever that is, and holds small press credentials, having actually published a collection of stories about a sensitive and profound writer's battles with a stream of sullen department heads and countless gorgeous but insane young women. Sadly, Wormwood, his charity publisher, has recently lost its grants and been bankrupted by their attempts to sustain Karl's literary career. The group began as a side project to his day job, teaching composition to the inmates of the local community college. Too advanced in age and attitude for the formal setting, and suffering from the variety of maladies which afflict the novice, we've all pinned our hopes on Karl, who humors us ^{to} no end.

"And so," The one-eyed King begins when we're all assembled, "who's going first tonight? It's Karen, right?"

Karen sits on the edge of her chair in rigid anticipation, her denim overalls struggling to contain the ample and animated breasts which vie for attention with Rebecca's pouting vulnerability. She's been wrestling for weeks with the first big love scene in her novel and finally handed it out. The recent purchase of a book entitled "Getting it On On Paper: ^{CAPS} How to write great Sex" has apparently provided the impetus for completing her book's first, ^{UNDERLINE?} and we hope not the last, love scene. The result is ten pages of clinical detail that falls somewhere between lesbian porn and a software manual. The table is silent, nervous hands grip coffee cups.

"Come on," Karl cajoles, "who's got comments for Karen?"

"I think you did a good job with the scene," Rebecca begins cautiously, "it seemed very real. I mean, I've never been in a lesbian relationship of course, but this

chapter rang true for me. The awkwardness of a first sexual experience, the tenderness between these two women, I think you got it down."

John of the three names, who invariably counters any compliment, is already shaking his head. "The scene is well enough written," he agrees. "But it doesn't flow with the rest of your work. Basically, you've switched to porn. I wouldn't call this literary."

never begin or continue a sentence with and or but

Karen's face falls immediately, and she glances left and right like she's put something down and suddenly can't remember where. "Pornography?" she says in disbelief, the way relatives say "cancer" in a waiting room. "Pornography?"

Karl interjects. "Rules," he says, "rules. Presenter does not respond, reviewers need to articulate their criticism."

"It's porn," John reiterates, "good porn. It appealed to my prurient interests."

Karen can't contain herself. "Pornography is violence against women. It's not possible for my work to be pornographic."

"Oh, but it is," John continues, "I'm talking the textbook definition here. It's ten pages of sucking and licking, major carpet munching going on. There's no literary devices being used here, unless you consider pornography a form of literature, which I suppose maybe it is."

Karen is hyperventilating. Rebecca attempts a rescue. "You can't call a work pornographic just because it contains erotic scenes. I agree with Karen, pornography is lies about women."

simply

"You mean violence?" John asks.

"Lies, violence, all those things."

~~So,~~ "And gay porn is what?" John ~~says~~ says. "I'm not getting the difference here."

The rest of us remain guardedly silent, not wanting to take sides with John, who no one can stand, especially when he's right.

"Let's reconsider for a minute," Karl suggests. "I don't think that I agree with John when he says that there are no literary devices being used here. Certainly there's ample use of metaphor. Let me read a section. "...Sara's down-covered mound was damp like a fertile knoll, glistening in the afternoon light, and fed by the underground springs of her repressed desires." *dew?*

"Well, sure, there's metaphor and simile in pornography," John says, "hung like a horse, horny as hell. It's still porn. My point is that this section wouldn't stand alone as anything but porn. *whereas a* A truly literary love scene would."

Karen has shut down completely, pulling her knees to her chest and rocking slowly back and forth in her chair, staring autistically off into space. It's only five minutes in and Karl has already managed to lose control of the class. The rest of us are twitching in our seats, waiting for Karen to go postal. Karl makes one more attempt to salvage the situation.

"Let me be clear about this," he begins with professorial seriousness, "writing sex effectively is one of the most difficult things we do. Karen has done a good job here, and *Conjuncti* within the context of her story, ~~and~~ though it's a bit long, I don't agree that the section is pornographic. It's obviously a draft, and the rewrite will probably tighten things up a bit. *Brit?* The devices she's employing are consistent with the techniques of modern romance *Have you warned Ian?* writing."

Karen comes back to life with Karl's last remark. "First, I'm a pornographer, now

I'm writing romance. What the fuck is the matter with you people? Don't you know anything? I hand out expecting some constructive criticism and all I get is this bullshit."

indent Karen is short of breath again, and fighting back tears, an emotion that doesn't fit at all with her drill-sergeant hair cut. She snatches her manuscript out of John's hand like he's soiled it, then grabs her coffee and book bag and storms out, ignoring the rest of us who hold are busy passing our annotated copies to the left as we always do post-crucifixion. I'm relieved that the confrontation has been cut short, and hope that we won't be spending the extra time afforded on Anna's latest opus on grocery shopping and puppies, but I'm being unrealistic.

As no one seems to care that Karen's lesbian sensibilities have been insulted, Karl moves right along.

"And now," he says with ring master enthusiasm, "we have Anna's latest, which I want to say from the start, is some of the finest writing I've seen from her."

Anna blushes with pride, and nods respectfully to Karl who sets the stage.

"Now, in this chapter, we have our heroine, Pamela, coping with the demands of combining family life and work, as well as her desire to write the great American novel before she turns forty. You'll remember that in the last chapter, Pamela was dealing with her daughter's sleep over with five other 13 year-old girls. Now it's the next day and Pamela must negotiate the grocery run as well as get the family dog groomed. I think Anna has done a brilliant job with this section in presenting a character who is able to function in two worlds; the day to day domestic life of a working mother, and the world of the artist who finds meaning and significance in her surroundings. But enough from me. Who has feedback for Anna?"

I've marked up Anna's text pretty viciously, but I hold back. Kellie, who is worried that Anna has the edge at the moment in their little literary competition, goes first.

"I liked this section," she says, "it has such a good sense of place. But I do think that you're stretching it a bit in the produce section. I mean, you say that the green apples 'glistened under the fluorescent light, moist with anticipation.' "

"Oh no!" John says in mock horror. "More porn." Karl motions with a finger across his neck and John bites his pen.

"What I mean is," Kellie continues, "anticipation of what? What is an apple anticipating?"

"Being bought?" Rebecca ventures.

"Or being eaten?" Kellie asks. "Anyway, it just seems over-written in some sections. Maybe I'm being nit-picky, but then you have the asparagus 'aching with freshness,' why would it ache?"

"I had trouble with some of these too," I offer. "But not just the fruit and vegetables. The description of the butcher as being 'willing and able to separate the meat from the bone' I'm not sure what your point is there. That's what butchers do, actually."

"I think the butcher represents something here," Karl says, like he's been prepped for the session by Anna. "Perhaps a love interest at some point, or an example of competent avocation, in contrast to the main character."

"I guess that I'm not sure what the context is for this scene," I say. "The butcher is only mentioned in passing, it doesn't go anywhere. Then we're in the frozen foods, getting a detailed description of the frost on the glass, which somehow brings back

childhood memories for Pamela of Christmas at her grandmother's house, and all the while, she's checking things off the grocery list."

"I agree that this section drags," Kellie adds, appreciating that I'm helping to knock the wind out of Anna's sails. "But," she says, not wanting to burn any bridges, "the puppy grooming scene is hilarious."

"Yes," Rebecca agrees, "the way you have her talking on the cell phone while the dog is barking, and she's yelling at the dog and her husband thinks she's yelling at him, and of course she is because obviously she's had it with his immature behavior. I thought it was all right on."

"I think it's working as light comedy," John offers with a shrug. "It's turning in to a light domestic chick novel, which is good, because that's where the market is these days." Anna frowns, an indication that she wants to be taken more seriously. Karl comes quickly to her defense.

"Sometimes, in a first draft, it takes a while to get the tone down, to see which way the story is going to develop, and determine how the characters are going to drive the action. Anna has a good start here, and what I would recommend, now that the characters have been established, we have an opportunity to take Pamela somewhere new. I'm thinking she needs to have an affair, maybe with the butcher, or a new character, maybe even her writing instructor. Pamela needs to break out of her shell and live."

Anna is blushing again, and reaching for her coffee; there is no writing instructor in her book. Kellie jumps back in.

"I don't think Pamela has to have an affair," she says, glaring at Karl who is

leaning back and tapping his pen casually on the table. "It seems almost predictable, doesn't it? Like it's being added to complete a formula."

"I think it's a good idea," John says. "We need some action. I think both Pamela and her boring husband should be having affairs, mix it up a little, add some spice. You need to keep the reader engaged, and grocery shopping ain't gonna cut it. Maybe make the husband gay. That would explain his lack of interest in Pamela."

"He's lost interest in Pamela because she's her own woman," Rebecca offers. "That's the best thing about Anna's book. Pamela is real and engaged and wanting more from life than just being a wife and mother, a domestic slave. She writes and has her own life and her jerk husband can't deal with it. It's so typical." All the women at the table nod in agreement.

"Overall," Karl concludes, "very well done. You've moved the story along nicely, and I think it's safe at this point to just keep going, don't rewrite this section yet. You're about what, half way through the novel now? It's time to sprint towards the finish, get to the end of the first draft."

Anna smiles, glancing briefly and adoringly at Karl, then nods smuggly towards Kellie like she's gained an advantage. Karl's cell phone rings, and he breaks his own rule by answering it as he says "How about a quick break before we get to our last handout?"

It appears that Karen is on the line, or at least someone who has attained a level of hysteria that is audible several feet away from Karl's thinning pate. We all pretend not to notice or care and break consists of the usual idle chat, mostly involving detailed excuses from the non-writers along with promises to hand something out sooner than later, along with John's horror stories about the slush pile which will surely be all our fates if any of

us ever actually send out a manuscript, and of course Rebecca's latest inventory of her ex's atrocities. I'm trawling for some indication of how my handout has been received, but everyone is tight lipped and distracted, almost like they know I'm baiting them and they don't want to be drawn in. We sit back with the knowledge that Karen quits the group regularly anyway, and always comes crawling back for more abuse.

"I've spoken with Karen," Karl announces, "and I'm afraid that I'll have to remind you all once again to try to be more sensitive...now, who has comments on our last piece of the evening?"

Karl scans the group expectantly, but no one raises their eyes from my handout, and several appear to be hurriedly reading the opening paragraph, pens in hand. It suddenly becomes painfully evident why I've had no reaction...no one has managed to actually complete the assigned reading, including Karl who calls for a one-week extension. This can't be how great novelists start out.