

Writer's Block

By Mohammad Khan

A blank page lies in front of Herbert. A page filled with potential and emptiness simultaneously, I hate it. He sits at his desk in the dark corner of his room. Herbert ruffles his shaggy brown hair staring at the blank page. A stale and misty air floats in the room. It reeks of old air and dead ideas.

“Ughh”. Herbert twiddles a pen between his fingers in frustration. “Ok so....*In a dark winter night above a dense forest, a plane comes crashing down..*” He scribbles it out and leans back in his chair.

His phone buzzes and jumps from his seat. Herbert grabs his pocket journal, grabs his coat, and heads out.

“*My friend Norman has been away for 6 years*”, he writes in his journal. “*We’ve been in contact through, but this is the first time we’ll be face to face. I’m meeting him for lunch at the Kerouac cafe for his only free hour of lunch.*”

The cafe is open to the streets and indoors is a quaint jazz bar where writers and creatives alike mingle and ponder about the world. A few people sit outside with a small cup of coffee, talking quietly as the sun passes overhead.

Inside the cafe, there’s a musty smog of cigar fumes. Old neon lights reflect off the mahogany bar and red leather bar stools. Keourac Cafe, to an outsider, seemed to be stuck in the 60s style.

“Herbert”, shouts a voice. I peer through the crowd of people and spot Norman sitting at the corner booth wearing a brown v-neck sweater and his hair slicked back. Being the quiet one, I simply wave and make my over to the booth.

Norman sits in the small booth with leather seats the form a semicircle with a brown maple wood table in the middle.

“It’s been a long time Norman”, I said sitting across from him. “How you doing?”

“Great. Great. How’s life? You still writing?”

“No. Well yes. I’m at a bit of a block. Something I’ve been stuck with. How’s Ally? Is her eye better?”

“yeah. Thanks for asking. She’s doing a lot better, wearing corrective glasses but she still gets migraines from time. I’m counting my blessings each day the paintball didn’t do more damage.”

“I still can’t believe she was hit with a paintball”, I said laughing. “I’m sorry but it’s still unbelievable.”

“No no. I agree. She was just sitting outside with her friend and someone drove by and shot paintballs into the bar. It was crazy. When you see it on the news, you brush it off, but when it happens to someone you know.”

“yeah life can be crazy.”

A waiter comes by. “What will you have?”

“Just a club soda”, says Norman.

“I’ll have water.”

“How’s your writing”, asks Norman. “You said you were stuck on something?”

“Starting is the hard part. Then once you get going it gets easier for a bit until you trip up again.”

“Why’d you start writing?”

“I dunno. It was fun. Creating worlds, seeing different perspectives. It was never anything serious just a hobby to me. Sometimes I took myself and gave my characters similar personalities and vices to see different perspectives or how things might’ve gone differently. Writing is easy. Writing a good story is hard. Maybe even impossible.”

“Well you could turn it into a career seeing how you’ve been writing for a while now.”

“I don’t know if I want to do writing as a career.”, I said. “It’s something I enjoy. And I wouldn’t want money to force me to write out of necessity rather than joy.”

“That’s interesting take. I’m glad you know exactly what you want out of this. Not many do and even less know what type of job they want. They chase an idea of their dream job without knowing what they’ll do when they get it. What will be different.”

“I never like when people talk about dream jobs. They’re missing the point. It’s not about finding a dream job. Not everyone can get a dream job, like the Barber in Pixar’s *Soul*, but a dream job can come from anywhere. You make the best of it.”

“I think there’s a balance between looking for the best opportunity and making the best of an opportunity”, starts Norman. “You can’t get caught up with ‘the grass is greener over there’ but you also don’t want to settle cause it hurts to settle when you know you should do better.”

We sat in silence margining in the quiet, intimate environment of the bar. The other customers continued talking quietly.

Norman continued. “Y’know, the oracle of Delphi in Ancient Greece at Apollo’s temple had ‘Know thyself’ inscribed at the temple. I think that’s the root of the issue. We don’t know ourselves. We look in the mirror and see a reflection of ourselves not how we actually look. People expect some grand story with a path bathed in light leading to our final destination. When in reality, we’re in the dark holding a flashlight. The flashlight illuminates a few steps and nothing more. Many of us use the light sparingly, hiding in known areas of safety. Content with their radius in the darkness. And very few venture into the darkness. Those who seek their selves. Maybe the pursuit is what many strive for and those are the stories we hear around the fire. The stories from the dark. Those who found it.”

“Do you think we have trouble knowing ourselves because we often run away from sensations that remind us of our mortality? When it gets a bit uncomfortable, a bit too cold, we turn on the heater rather than embrace the cold and feel ‘hey I’m alive. I’m here’. When it rains, we hold an umbrella rather than feel the water dampen our hair and stream down our face. By avoiding these sensations, we feel numb and in a form of stasis and so far from ourselves. We avoid these moments and search for other moments when in reality these are the moments we feel truly alive and in tune with ourselves.”

“Maybe it is a mortality issue. But finding yourself isn’t always a choice of living in comfort versus living in complete connection with nature and no comforts of modern life. It’s more of carving a place in the universe for yourself.”

“Or maybe there is no self. Only what we know what others tell us. Our self is made by what people tell us about ourselves. And so the hunt for the self is pointless since the self doesn’t exist.”

Norman’s phone buzzes. It’s been an hour.

“Herbert”, starts Norman, “it’s not the destination that matters. It’s the journey. The self may not exist until you find it. The dream job may not exist until you find it or make it yourself.”

He stands. “You may not find a good story, but it’s the journey to that story that matters. It was good talking to you. Let’s do this again.”

And with that, he left me alone at the booth. I hadn’t noticed the rest of the club was empty and the bartender was cleaning his glasses. The waiter didn’t want to disrupt our conversation so they stayed back.

I walked back to my car with an empty feeling. I met with Norman to help with my story and I felt I had wasted it.

Then it began to rain. It quickly turned into a downpour. People scrambled for shelter, using newspapers, coats, anything for a shield from the rain.

I embraced it with open arms. The water drenched my coat and hair.

In that moment, I discovered a story. I discovered my story.