

GHOST WRITER

Alec stared at the blank wall screen. Long ago when people still typed individual words out on a keyboard, such staring was called “writer’s block”. The modern *Writer’s Block* was the computer virus that had wiped out his manuscript. Frozen, he’d watched words and letters cascade to the foot of the screen. Small simulated flames rose from the letter piles. By the time he tried to shut down the Muse, he was too late. The image of a fifty ton block flashed on the screen and metallic laughter issued from the speakers. A row of orange lights blinked on his console. His touchscreen was blank except for a single redheaded grinning face.

Responding to his panicked cry, Linda tore into the study, glanced at him collapsed in the computer chair, then shook his shoulder as if to check if he’d had a heart attack.

“It’s gone.” Alec waved at the screen. “Muse is dead.” Barely able to talk he told her what had happened. He tossed aside the touchscreen and hauled out a dusty keyboard. He typed in a few commands; they hung on his screen along with a flashing cursor.

“Will you let me try?”

He didn’t object while Linda fumbled with the old keyboard. Normally he wouldn’t let her near the Muse, but now that the virus had totalled the system, he

doubted she could do it any further harm.

The Muse was born after years of programming, writing his own software and adapting software swapped from other creatives. The best creatives were the best technicians. To compose a story, he entered the parameters the editor supplied: schematics for characters X, Y and Z, the high concept and the plot turn density. The muse produced fifty submissions for him to choose from. In one day, he had what used to take writers a month to complete: a finished and polished screenplay acceptable to London studios.

With an unruffled calm, Linda tried the obvious trick of powering the system down and bringing it up, but the wall screen remained blank and red lights on the console continued to blink.

“What were you working on?” she asked.

“*Helicopters and Rushes.*”

“When’s it due?”

“Monday.”

Linda shrugged. “That still gives you five days.”

“Linda, don’t you realize that is my big break, the first studio with ties to Hollywood. If I miss the deadline, the job’s gone. They can get any creative to gin it out.”

For several months he fed the muse thousands of best-selling action scripts. He even hacked into other creatives’ Muses to poach their secret software. He must have brought back *Writer’s Block* on one of his forays.

“Is it on backup?” Linda asked.

“An early version’s somewhere out in cyberspace. If I can get to it.”

“Do you remember enough of the script to write it down?”

“Manually?”

“Using letters like these.” Linda held up the keyboard.

“You expect me to type out a script?”

Linda’s oval face broke into a faint smile.

“People used to write manually. They put down on paper whatever popped into their heads. They’d find a story inside them instead of inside a computer.”

“Yes, you did twenty years ago. No modern studio will look at a manual submission.”

Linda stood up, a cold gleam in her eye. She paused in the doorway. “Is there anything else you want from me?”

Long tangled hair fell on her shoulders. Her dowdy dress from a charity shop couldn’t disguise her wide girth. He realized that for the past year he hadn’t found her attractive or interesting. She could not accept what it took to be a successful creative. She’d complain every time he bought new hardware or travelled to creative trade shows. Years ago she had tried to create, but had never mastered the art of programming neural software.

“Is your com-screen working?” Alec asked.

Linda walked next door. “Everything’s dead,” she said as if only a light bulb had burned out. “The virus has totalled the network. Mobile phone’s out, too.”

No way of communicating with the world except by carrier pigeon.

Alec shuffled into the kitchen to make a cup of coffee. As usual stacks of dirty dishes filled the counters. Since Linda’s day-trading business started going south, she ignored the condition of the house. He decided not to fight the dirty dishes.

“I’m going out to borrow someone’s Muse,” he shouted to the open doorway.

“Expect me when you see me.”

His electric car whined into life and started down the single track road. He loved their Aberdeenshire glen where they'd moved from London and where the only neighbours were sheep, but solitude exacted its cost. When the web went down he and Linda might as well be living on the moon. Now, the only creatives who might help him lived in Aberdeen; most were too self-absorbed to even listen to him. He could try Robin who had helped him build his Muse. If only they had met before he ran into Linda. Whenever he was around Robin, new ideas flowed with hardware and software solutions to implement them. Unlike other creatives, she was generous with her Muse. However she wanted a relationship in return, one that was closer than he found comfortable. He decided to videophone her from the Huntly Tesco.

He strode up to the supermarket's glass door only to find Gordon blocking his way. The unshaven derelict in the long button-less coat waved a tattered copy of The Big Issue in Alec's face. Alec often bought a copy from him but realized he only had copper change in his pocket.

"New issue today," Gordon said and shoved the magazine in Alec's face.

"I'll catch you later." Alec tried to circumvent Gordon, but Gordon moved sideways to intercept him.

"No money? Wait a minute." Gordon rummaged in a shopping bag and brought out a pink flyer. "Take this for the lady. A free cleaning service. Yours for any spare change."

Alec handed Gordon all his spare change; took the flyer. His house needed attention badly. Maybe Linda would make use of Gordon's ad.

The video call went through. Robin's lean face appeared on a small screen, and immediately broke into a smile. After an awkward greeting, Alec told her he wanted to stop by.

“I’ll be here as always,” Robin said. “Bring some wine.”

Placing a call with Network Repair Service brought him to a generic help screen. He typed in his ID. For “Description of Problem” he put down “Writer’s Block.” The computer voice promised to send a repairman later in the day. With luck, they’d revive the network, but he doubted they could bring up the Muse. He bought a bottle of vintage wine, and left the store.

He left the store, but not before Gordon shouted after him all the way to the car, “Call for maids in a row. Pretty maids.”

Robin had not wanted to break up. She wouldn’t hear of his creative concerns until she had dragged him into her bedroom. A tall, slender woman with thick curly hair, she’d put on a flowery top and loose black pants, just for him. Her broad smile disarmed him. He did not refuse her advances. As they made love, his brain spun in circles, recalling the disaster at his mountain home. Robin realized from his anaemic kisses that he had drifted far from her. When he told her what had happened, she turned her head away.

“I suppose you want a shot of my Muse,” she said.

“You feel I’m just using you?”

“Well, yes.”

“I should go. This isn’t right. We agreed before that this relationship isn’t good for either of us. I’ve always been honest with you and that will never change.”

Robin smiled. “You’ve driven a long way, and the script is important for you. Go try out my Muse but keep it secret. I don’t want to be expelled from the guild for loaning out the Muse.”

Passing into her attic studio, they sat before the Muse, a large glowing cube set

in the centre of the room. Seagulls perched outside the open window broke into a series of unnerving screams. He shut the window. Robin's long fingers drifted over the cube; writing and moving images sprang to life on the surface. She entered his story's specifications. A few minutes later a list of several submissions popped into the cube.

"Those won't work," Alec said after he'd skimmed the submissions. "Your Muse isn't set up for action stories. I need people swinging from cables, gunfire, explosions and one short romance. All your stories are inside people's heads, analyzing their thoughts. I can't do character driven stories."

"They still sell, whether you like them or not."

To please her, Alec copied one script onto disk. As he placed the tube in his pocket his hand encountered paper, and he drew out a crumpled sheet.

CALL TODAY -- PRETTY MAIDS ALL IN A ROW

ELECTROSTATIC DUST CLEANING

Below the heading was a cartoon of girls in bikinis making up a bed. Turning over the paper he found it covered with longhand writing. He hadn't seen cursive for twenty years. He could hardly write anything longhand except his name. He found the letters difficult to decipher.

"Watch out! You're about to hit that tree on the right. What are you thinking?"

"Cable's about to break. (.....) some height. My God, is anyone up there listening?"

"(.....) you praying to me or to your God?"

(Explosion)

"Now that did it. Who's going to clean up that mess?"

“(....) I was thinking that you’d volunteer for the job. Or, have you forgotten that you’re a fire-fighter?”

Robin rested her head on his shoulder. “Where did that mindless drivel come from.”

“The dialog’s terrible. Cut it out and you might be a usable story.”

“Well, maybe whoever wrote it could ghost-write your script for you.”

“Gordon?”

“Who’s Gordon?”

“The homeless man who sells the Big Issue outside the Huntly Tesco. He’s crazy. He can’t produce a coherent thought, never mind a sentence. He couldn’t have written this.”

Robin smiled. “Maybe he’s a frustrated handwriter who couldn’t sell his stuff and went nuts. You should see if he has more material. Maybe you could help him out.”

Back at his house he found a Network Repair van. A scrawny man who looked barely twenty clacked away at Linda’s keyboard. Her com-screen swirled with undecipherable writing. His Muse was still dark. Several familiar menus popped up on Linda’s com-screen.

“I’ve reloaded the system,” the man said. “But I can’t get to your backup copies. The backup site isn’t responding. ” He zipped over to a new site, scanned what appeared to be a bulletin, and then laughed noisily. “They’ve been hit by Writer’s Block too. You exported it to them.”

“Can you bring up the Muse?”

“I wouldn’t go near it. You creatives know more than anyone about Muses. I’d

call the *Lemon Tree Creatives Guild*.”

“What’ll you do?” Linda asked after the helper slammed the front door.

He took her hand and felt its reassuring pressure. “Thanks for sticking with me. But I need to be alone to figure this out.”

Unlike Gordon, he could not hand-write a script, and without the Muse he was nothing. He had poured all his creativity into her: his insights, his vision. He recalled the wintry day when the Muse produced her first story, a crime mystery whose ending he couldn’t guess no matter how he tried. *And I made her --- this Muse and she wrote this*. The emotional rush hit him like a heroin shot, and became as addictive.

Whenever the Muse was down for maintenance and wasn’t producing stories, he felt bereft. Less than human. After a program upgrade he’d be so high from reading the new scripts that he couldn’t sleep. At first Linda shared his enthusiasm and read the submissions with interest, but not lately.

Though the sky was dark as pitch, the homeless man was still there, trying to stick pink flyers into shoppers’ hands. His lips blue, he shivered in the night breeze. Alec could scarcely believe that he, a creative, was approaching a homeless man for help, but such was his need.

“That flyer with the pretty maids you gave me, had some writing,” Alec said.

“Was it yours?”

Alec’s cracked lips parted in a smile. “Oh yes.”

“Do you have more pages?”

“Hundreds.” Gordon dipped into his bulging shopping bag and extracted a small sheaf of yellow papers.

“Can you bring them to my car?”

Sitting in the driver's seat Alec leafed through several pages while Gordon stood outside, his arms wrapped tight for warmth. Each sheet was covered with handwritten text, pages headed and numbered: clean copies without corrections. Unfortunately the characters were ordinary people of no interest to studios or movie-going kids who demanded the larger-than life. But perhaps somewhere in the heap he'd find a story he could use.

Alec took out a wad of bills. "Can I buy all your papers?"

Gordon scowled, drew himself up and clenched his fists.

"Really, how much do you want for them?" Alec ventured. "I'll give you a lot."

Gordon thrust his shopping bag at Alec. "They're yours. Take them."

"Let me pay you."

"Gimme a few quid for some coffee."

"I'll give you fifty quid."

Gordon laughed. "Fifty quid? No way. Ten is enough."

The yellow coin hardly weighed anything as Alec dropped it into the dirty palm.

After dinner, Alec shut himself in his studio and sifted through the stack. Many pages were water-damaged and scarcely legible. He found military stories, science fiction and even a couple of romances. The helicopter story appeared usable, though he would have to change its downbeat ending. Another action story was about a poor mother looking for a girl who had been kidnapped, but never finding her. Didn't Gordon realize that no one watched downers? The romance kept his attention and contained commercially viable erotica.

Linda appeared in the doorway wearing a nightgown. Ignoring his unwelcoming look she walked up to his console and stared at the spread of yellow sheets.

“I’m sorry, but I’m busy,” Alec said.

Linda picked up a page. A cloud grew over her forehead.

“Where did this come from?” she asked in a voice like a violin string about to break.

“Gordon, the Big Issue man outside Tesco. He’s a closet hand-writer. He just sold me his entire life’s work.”

“For how much?”

“Ten quid.”

“You gave him ten quid for all that?”

“He wouldn’t take more. The writing’s a bit dark. You can tell he’s had a rough life on the streets.”

“I suppose you’ll pass it off as your own.”

“I bought it.”

“Right.”

“I’m very busy and have to pull together a manuscript.” He stood up, hoping she would take the hint and leave. With lips drawn tight, she studied him. “It’s all legal,” Alec said “It’s not plagiarism to pay a ghost writer. You don’t even need to acknowledge him. What use to Gordon are all those sheets anyway?”

Linda had grown quite pale. “Why did he give them to you?”

“Maybe he needed the money. Look, it’s a solution to the immediate crisis. I can adapt one of his stories and have a trial script out by Monday.”

Linda slammed the paper down on the table. “You don’t know anything about

those papers. You don't even know if he wrote them. Did he tell you he wrote them?"

"I guess he did."

"Maybe you need to double check." She stalked off, letting the door slam.

He picked up a sheet. The cursive slanted uniformly to the right, the lines straight, evenly spaced, and each "I" dotted. Not what he would expect from a man who had lost his mind, who slept somewhere in a caravan and lived from cans of Nutella. Like other Big Issue people, he appeared from nowhere and owned nothing except for his name. No one knew anything about him. Did he write stories each night under a candle? Not these days. More likely, Gordon had written the pages long before he became psychotic.

Having chosen the helicopter story, Alec scanned the sheets into the system, posted them on his monitor and began to transcribe them. He magnified the text to decipher it. His fingers fumbled with the keyboard, unable to locate the punctuation marks. Much of the dialog was hopelessly wordy and outdated, so he snipped it out. In an action story, dialog only got in the way. Audiences suffered through it while they waited for the next car chase or explosion. To soup up the script he cut and pasted in a couple of scenes from his old scripts. Proofread the draft. The studio editor would find some problems, but nothing that couldn't be fixed.

The front door slammed, and he heard the whine of Linda's car as it backed out of the driveway. He had to have really annoyed her, for her to get dressed and go commiserate with a friend. He hoped she wouldn't spread the story that he had stolen a homeless man's life-work.

He flipped on a wall screen, put on his 3-D glasses and tuned into a rerun of a SF sitcom. Spaceships tore through starry clouds with dizzying speed, shot volleys of laser fire at each other. Young alien women in tight clothing materialized and

dematerialized. Not unlike one of Gordon's stories. The rapid-fire dialog was also disturbingly familiar. What if...? He turned off the show and returned to his console.

He rummaged through the flyers. Sure enough, there was the page with characters Xero, Zeno and Yato, straight out of the SF sitcom, but instead of fielding explosions they were chatting about philosophical issues no one could resolve. Stuff no one cared about it. So, Gordon had seen the program and was using the characters. Except that the show was barely a year old. How did Gordon know about the SF sitcom? If he handwrote, he had no access to a computer. Had he seen a TV lately?

As Alec flipped through the soiled pages, a line caught his eye.

"Alec and Linda got into the boat. Alec grabbed the oar and pushed off."

The familiar names stared at him from the page. Turning it over, he found a small grocery list scribbled in the right hand corner.

Linda did not return until after midnight. She strode into the living room and saw him collapsed on the couch. Her face was frozen white, an impassive mask. After everything he had said, he wasn't surprised.

He looked up at her but was scarcely able to meet her probing eyes.

"This is yours isn't it?" Alec said, nodding at the pile of paper on the coffee table. "I don't know what to say. Some of it is very good."

Linda slumped into the arm chair opposite him, and picked up a sheet. A bitter smile broke from her as she scanned it.

"You were ready to believe that the man outside Tesco could write better than I?" Her thin lips trembled and she let the sheet drop.

"You threw it all into a rubbish bin, didn't you," Alec said, trying not to stammer. "I am so sorry. We live separate lives and don't see each other long enough to talk about anything important. I never know what you're doing while I'm in there

creating. Will you let me read this now?"

"You won't like it. I'm no creative," Linda said wiping a tear from her face.

"You creatives produce what the world wants; what you can sell, but I write because I have to. When I'm alone and I need to tell my story. I don't need any machine or Muse to help me."

She drew herself up, looked at him coldly, and added, "I don't want you reading my stuff."

She swept up the pile and retreated with it to her room.