

Ghost Writer

Studying the manuscript, Drew felt a little at sea. These were uncharted waters, and he needed a compass.

Turning the words over in his head, he could hear the familiar voice.

An orange moon hung low in the frozen sky, a paper lantern above the blue land. The valley lay outstretched like a corpse, and the air twanged with the chill.

They were Harry Stinson's words. For now. Drew had undertaken to make them his own. Squaring the circle would be easier, he thought in moments like this.

He looked up at the framed photo of his late friend—Harry looking dapper in his tuxedo and receiving his award at the Publishers' Gala. His sharp features a little softened by the trim white beard. The narrow, shrewd eyes. His smile looked strained in the photo, despite the occasion, as though he sensed something impending.

His death two months later came as a shock. And then Marla disclosing her husband's odd 'bequest' so soon after—his wish that Drew Spencer would finish Harry's novel if something happened. "He was going to ask you himself, Drew—he so admired your work."

Her offer of their cottage at Echo Bay was the clincher. "Harry will be right there with you."

Visiting the Stinsons at their remote cottage on Georgian Bay had been a summer highlight for years. In the evenings Drew and Harry would sit at the fire-pit discussing books over a scotch, hearing the loons' demented cries in the stillness. Jackie and Marla playing dominos up on the deck, the boys sleeping soundly after another day in the water.

Now he felt like an intruder, sitting at the same desk where his friend had slumped forward onto his typewriter—dead before his head hit the keys, the coroner determined.

There was no going back. Drew had already deposited the publisher's advance, and Harry's sizable readership was hooked on the idea of a posthumous collusion. *Quill and Quire* was quick to pick up the story, maintaining this was a first in the publishing world. 'A Novel Collaboration' read the heading.

"I don't need to imagine the rest of Harry's book," Drew had remarked in the interview. "The novel's there. I just have to find it."

Now he regretted his cavalier response. It had already taken him an entire week to decipher Harry's colour-coded notes scrawled higgledy-piggledy across the typed pages.

Never comfortable with computers, Harry had always begun by bashing out a chapter at a time on his old Imperial Electric. Then he would revise it twice—first edits in blue, second in red—before continuing. All drafts completed, he would pack up and drive the five hours home from his cottage. He spent another month tweaking and polishing before handing Marla the finished manuscript to digitize.

A couple of days into his second week Drew had unscrambled Harry's annotations and produced ninety pages of a promising storyline.

Gareth Olsen takes a year's break from college—and girlfriend Sandra—to work off his student debts at a remote gold mine in the Yukon. There he encounters the plant manager's daughter, Naomi, a silken-voiced nymphet who's mired in her own unhappy relationship. Her boyfriend Dan, wheelchair-bound following an accident at the mine, lives in Vancouver where Naomi spends her university semesters. Gareth's co-workers at the mine warn him the girl is trouble, but he's already besotted with her.

Harry's epigraph, a stanza from "The Cremation of Sam McGee", summoned the spell of the Yukon, the strange things done in the midnight sun by the men moiling for gold. His opening paragraph—the lantern moon, the twang of frozen air, and the valley stretched out like a corpse—evoked the North's soul-sucking isolation.

After ten days at Echo Bay, Drew felt his own solitude. Looking out over the distant Sound, he saw only the occasional outboard silently unzip the water's calm surface. He wondered how Harry had coped with the isolation for six weeks at a time.

Sitting at the desk now Drew could hear the waves washing over the rocks, the wind moaning in the pines, and the herring gulls' plaintive cry deepening the solitude around him.

Harry had just started a new chapter when the stroke came, in mid-simile as it turned out.

High above the townsite, the gravel road wreathed its way up to the distant pit, where tiny excavators nibbled at the rock face. Dull green Euclids crawled up and down the mountain road like —.

Like what? What was Harry about to write?

Drew glanced up at the photo, studied the words again, picturing the scene, then began to type.

The storm disrupted his night. With the thunder cracking and the wind howling through the pines he could hear the waves explode on the rocks below. Somewhere at the back of the house, a banging noise—a loose shutter most likely.

In the morning he secured the shutter, then made a pot of coffee before sitting down to read what he'd added the evening before.

But when he came to his simile it wasn't what he remembered. He stared at the writing.

The phone rang at his side and made him jump.

Jackie.

The school bus had just picked up the boys, so she had some time before setting off for work. He continued to stare at the screen as she talked.

"Drew, are you listening? I asked how the writing's going."

"Sorry, love. I'm a little distracted here. Something rather odd has happened."

"What is it?"

"Well, it's weird. Have you got a minute?"

"Sure. What's going on?"

"Can I read you what Harry was actually writing the moment he died?"

“Oh Gawd. All right, go ahead.”

He read Harry’s last paragraph up to the dull green Euclids. “And that’s where it breaks off.”

“Okay, but what are Euclids?”

“Dump trucks, I imagine. I can’t be absolutely certain because there’s no Internet up here.”

“So what’s wrong?”

“Well, what I thought I wrote last night was, ‘dull green Euclids crawled up and down the mountain road like aphids on a plant stem.’”

“So?”

“So this morning it’s a ski resort— ‘dull green Euclids glided up and down the mountain like a line of lift chairs.’”

“Obviously you changed it and didn’t realize. You say you do that all the time.”

“Do what?”

“Have these spells where you’re not even aware that you’re writing. You must have changed it when you were in a writing trance.”

She had a point. He surprised himself sometimes when he read over what he’d written just hours before.

“Okay, except I’ve never skied.”

“So? There’s a lot you don’t do yourself that gets into your stories.”

“Harry skied all his life.”

“Exactly. And aren’t you supposed to be writing like Harry? Anyway, I like it. And from a distance a line of moving trucks would look like lift chairs going up and down a mountain.”

“Aphids work better. It’s high summer in the story—dry, hot, and dusty—definitely not ski season. An aphid summer. And trucks viewed from a distance would crawl like them, same green colour and everything. So why would I change aphids to lift chairs?”

“Maybe because you intuited that’s what Harry would write. By the way, Euclids are Hitachis now. I just Googled it. And they’re orange, not green.”

“Oh, Jesus. Well, I can’t change what was already there.”

“But orange trucks from a distance would actually look even more like lift chairs, not aphids. Anyway, who’ll know if you change it?”

“He’ll know, that’s who.”

There was silence at the other end. When she spoke she sounded concerned.

“Darling, do you think you need a break? Maybe come home for a bit? You’ve been burning the candle at both ends. You said so yourself.”

“No, I’m seeing this through. No going back. Anyway, forget all this, okay? I’m fine, honest. Tell me, how are the boys?”

She made sense. The whole point was to write like Harry. And Drew had said many times that he was never satisfied with his own writing until it sounded like someone else.

He rewrote the sentence.

In the distance, bright orange Hitachi trucks glided up and down the mountain like lift chairs.

On good days he felt suspended from the writing process altogether, the words seeming to come, not from him but through him—the familiar creative languor.

On the days when he struggled, Naomi was the problem. Harry’s capricious nymphet could turn willful and moody without warning. Like on the evening she and Gareth had arranged to go swimming together in the hot spring beyond the airfield. She told him she’d bring wine and he should bring ‘precautions’.

He wrote quickly, the words flowing, taking Gareth up the path to Naomi’s front door.

It was her mother who answered. “I’m so sorry, Gareth, but Naomi’s not feeling well. She hopes you won’t be upset.” The woman smiled, sadly, he thought, her eyes misting up. “She’ll get in touch when she feels better.” She closed the door, leaving him on the step, his mind in a whirl.

Drew stared at the finished paragraph. Naomi not in the mood, and that was that. A done deal. Not for the first time either.

Yes, characters could be stubborn, and a writer had to know when to loosen the reins. Harry once said that if your characters are real you have to trust them to know what they want.

But Naomi was defiant by nature. Drew had planned for her and Gareth to have steamy sex in the hot spring. It was high time they got intimate. But no, Naomi would have a headache instead. Not tonight Gareth. And screw you, writer man.

What was going on with her this time anyway? Had she gone upstairs to call her boyfriend in Vancouver? Were they arguing again? Dan could be stubborn and moody, she said.

That makes two of you, he thought, and continued typing.

The next morning he turned the desk around so he wasn't always looking at Harry's photograph, the narrow eyes scrutinizing him from across the room. And at the end of each day he logged out, so he would have to use his password to get back in. Again, he shared his puzzlement with Jackie.

"Sometimes I feel Harry's not letting go."

"Remember what we said, Drew. That's a good thing. It means it's working for you."

"I feel invisible sometimes. The girl ignores me."

"You're imagining things. I know that's what writers do but aren't you obsessing a little?"

"I'm sorry, but this is not like anything I've experienced." He looked at the screen. "I'll tell you something though."

"What?"

He smiled. "I think it's coming together."

In September Naomi flew back to Vancouver for her final year of school.

Gareth watched from pit as the Piper took off from the airfield below. It climbed towards the distant range, then banked west, the sun glinting off its silver wings.

She planned to break off with Dan after graduating and come back to the mine to be with Gareth. He would write his regrets to Sandra back home and send for his belongings. Naomi's father told him he'd make foreman one day.

But Drew had other ideas. A letter from Sandra's mother back home would change everything. She would inform Gareth that Sandra had overdosed, though she was now recovering. She still loved him, her mother said, unable herself to fathom why.

The shock would snap Gareth out of the spell he'd been under since coming to this desolate, Godless place—land of the midnight sun and benighted souls. In thrall to the siren girl, he had lost his way.

He would call Naomi in Vancouver and tell her he was going home. She would scream abuse and threaten violence, but he'd be free of her.

Drew even had the final paragraph roughed out in his head, the words echoing Harry's opening lines.

Gareth stood at his window and stared out at the dead land through his reflection in the glass. How pale he looked. He breathed mist onto the glass and watched the ghost of himself disappear. He pulled his suitcase out from under the bed.

Something like that.

Drew poured a scotch and went onto the deck to watch the sunset. In late October its flaming sphere touched down exactly between the tip of Manitoulin and the Tobermory headland. Sipping his whisky he watched the sun unroll a crimson carpet across the lake to the rocks below.

Back indoors, he opened his laptop.

Why not write the final chapter now and be done? He set his glass down next to the bottle and began to type.

It was nearly midnight when he finished. He shut down his laptop, securing his work till morning.

The fire in the stove had diminished to a glow. He slid a couple of logs through the hatch and watched them ignite. The flames sent shadows dancing along the walls and onto the ceiling. A job well done, he thought, and raised a nightcap to the dancing shadows.

He slept late. By the time he had dressed and made coffee it was almost ten. After packing his case he opened his laptop.

He keyed in his password and began reading. It was all good, he thought, as he scrolled slowly through the final chapter.

Until the last page.

He read it a second time. What the hell.

Naomi had come back early. And she had company.

Gareth watched the Land Rover pull up outside her front door. She stepped out, her red windbreaker a bright flare in the sun. She walked to the back of the vehicle, opened the doors, and stood to one side.

A mobile platform emerged bearing a wheelchair. The young man seated in the chair had a plaid blanket wrapped around his legs. He called out her name in a raspy voice.

She approached and stood before him, fists jammed into her waist as she watched the platform descend. Then she stepped behind the chair, turned, and pulled it onto the road.

Gareth watched her lean into the chair and push it up the path. Her mother stood in the doorway, her face set.

Impassive, like the unseeing mountains.

Drew stared at his screen, trying to remember the words he thought he'd written. Eventually he closed his laptop and slid it into its case.

After loading up the car he came back inside to see that everything was in order before he locked up.

It was the right ending, its resolution implied in the beginning. Inevitable, as it should be, and not predictable.

Was the story ever his, he wondered. Was it even his friend's? A good story writes itself, Harry told him once. In days gone by writers spoke about Muses.

Standing on the deck Drew watched the clouds race across the bright morning sky. Like children at play, scampering over the hills, set free by the wind.