

Wilderness House Literary Review 12/1

Adam Matson

The Human Word Processor

Stephen King sat in his office in Bangor, Maine, staring at the story he was writing on his word processor, and he realized he could not stop writing. He had written dozens of books and hundreds of short stories, and he wanted to stop-

Please God let me fucking stop

-because he had said everything he wanted to say, many times over. The ideas still poured through his mind like water coursing through the Orono Dam, but he had reached the point where he found himself drowning in the flow.

He decided his hands were to blame. As long as he had hands he would continue to sit down at his word processor every day and churn out fresh pages. And his lifelong best friend / worst enemy, Constant Reader, would always continue to read them.

He picked up the telephone and called his neighbor, Bosco, a retired lawn mower salesman, a friend on whom he had called before for strange favors.

"Bosco, I need you to cut my hands off," said Stephen King.

"You need me to goddamn what?"

"I can't stop writing. It's killing me. I need you to cut me off. Literally."

There was a long and not-unfamiliar pause on the other end of the phone.

"Steve, maybe we should just get a six-pack and watch the Red Sox," Bosco said eventually.

"I no longer drink," said Stephen King. "I quit smoking, I quit drugs. But I'm addicted to writing. It's like a rat burrowing inside me, eating me alive."

"That sounds like one of your stories right there."

It was. The story he was working on was called "The Rat," about a writer whose latest story had taken on the form of a rat with sharp teeth, burrowing into the writer's stomach through his belly button, and growing, soon to consume the writer, or maybe just cause him to burst and spill all over the floor like a bag of spaghetti and meatballs.

"If you're refusing to help me, then I may have to take matters into my own hands," said Stephen King.

"Come on over and watch the game," said Bosco.

Stephen King did not go over to Bosco's to watch the Sox. Instead he picked up a meat cleaver from his kitchen with his left hand and used it to hack off his right hand. He stared at the blood-gushing stump in terror and called 9-1-1 on his cell phone with his remaining hand.

Stephen King had enough basic understanding of physics and human anatomy to know that a person could not use a cleaver to cut off both of their hands. Because once you cut off the first one....

Wilderness House Literary Review 12/1

So he self-amputated the second hand with a revolving table saw in his garage. By the time the ambulance arrived he was sitting on his front porch with his arms in the air, light-headed and mumbling incoherently from blood loss.

For a couple of months he was happy. He had no hands, and thus no fingers, and thus could not continue to write, and finally he was able to fucking relax. He had saved the hands in zip-locked plastic bags in his freezer, which had begun to disturb his wife.

But as time went on he knew that he would not be able to quit writing until he completed the rat story. Unfinished business was worse than addiction. Soon he was back in his office, having affixed to the stump of one wrist a prosthetic device that could hold a pencil. To his other wrist-stump he had affixed a prosthetic device that held a pencil-sharpener. At first it was slow-going and physically awkward to write, but soon the pages flew off his table. He then discovered it was easier just to affix two unsharpened pencils to his wrist-stumps and type the story on his word processor, pecking away like a determined bird with long talons.

But the self-loathing and anxiety of addiction returned and he knew that the rat story was indeed a vicious rat, literally (well, figuratively) eating his soul. He realized the problem was that his arms were still capable of working a word processor. His goddamn fucking arms.

The next day he waited until Bosco had left his house to go bowling with some friends, then he dialed his neighbor's number and left a message on his voicemail: "Bosco, old boy, I'm really, truly sorry for what I'm going to do today. I owe you a six-pack of cold ones."

The yard behind Bosco's house contained all different models of lawn mowers, both push- and ride-, as Bosco, though retired from sales, liked to keep his hand in the lawn-mowing game around Bangor. Stephen King walked next door and selected a sizable Husqvarna push-model and yanked the chord with his teeth. The mower roared to life. Stephen King then pushed the mower over onto its side with his feet, and knelt on the grass before the hungry, gyrating blade.

"This is for the greater good," he told himself. Then he closed his eyes, held out his arms, and leaned forward.

Bosco and his wife spent the rest of the summer spraying their back yard with a hose to get all of Stephen King's blood out of the grass. But the promised six-pack arrived on Bosco's doorstep, and Bosco knew his neighbor to be a bit of an eccentric, and soon they were back to watching baseball together, though Stephen King was unable to clap when the Sox scored a run because the stumps of his arms were about five and eight inches long, respectively (he had leaned sort of leftwise into the spinning blade, and passed out from shock before the rotor got high enough through his right arm).

There was no more writing, and no more rat, and Stephen King felt happy for a while. But then the baseball season ended, leaving many slow nights with not much to do, and inevitably he found himself back in his office, staring at his word processor. The beast had drawn him back. The rat had filled his intestines, devoured his stomach, was chewing and hack-

Wilderness House Literary Review 12/1

ing its way upward through his torso toward his heart. Only one entity would survive, he knew- either the rat, or his soul. He must finish the story, give birth to the rat, purge himself of the monster.

Pretty much anything could be found on the internet. Stephen King scanned the web late at night until he discovered a revolutionary new technology being developed in Korea. Though the device was not on the market for sale yet, Stephen King was able to purchase a prototype using his fame, the fine art of persuasion, and his television royalties from *Under the Dome*.

In two weeks a package arrived in the mail. The package contained a long, rolled-up mat, which Stephen King kicked open with his feet and spread across his office floor. The mat was a life-sized replica of a keyboard that a person could type with stepping from one letter or symbol to the next, like the board game *Twister*. Stephen King paid a computer science grad student at the University of Maine \$200 and a case of brews to hook up the mat to his word processor.

Stephen King was back in business. It took him a couple of weeks to master the new technology, but soon he was step-typing like a wizard. He could hop out fifty-six words a minute, almost twenty pages a day, before collapsing each afternoon, exhausted, into a well-deserved nap. He developed such strong legs and nimble feet that he ran the Bangor marathon, and finished fourth. His grandchildren came over to play *Dance, Dance Revolution*, and he destroyed them at it. And the manuscript of "The Rat" swelled to 784 pages. He edited it down to 690 by stomping on the "delete" button, then he kicked the story off to his publisher.

"The Rat" was a complex piece of meta-horror-fiction filled with long chapters wherein the writer converses with the rat inside him, begs for his life, grants the rat freedom in the form of a novel in exchange for his own (the writer's) spiritual freedom. The book sold four million copies, and critics called it the most important philosophical work since Kafka's *Metamorphosis*.

Three re-prints and an HBO miniseries later, Stephen King found himself back in his office, miserably kicking out "The Rat 2." He felt worse than ever, a slave to Constant Reader, who loved "The Rat," and wanted more.

"I can't take it anymore, Bosco," he told his neighbor. "I need you to take your chainsaw and cut off my legs."

"Steve, you know I can't do that," Bosco said.

"No one else will help me."

"There's liability, old buckaroo."

"I'll pay you! I'll sign a waiver with my toes!"

"Nope. Sorry."

Stephen King knew he could not cut off his legs on his own. With no arms he had nothing with which to operate a tool. But what he did have was a familiarity with the local train schedule.

Wilderness House Literary Review 12/1

On a dry fall night he staggered out to the train tracks on the edge of town. If he could not step on the typing mat, he could not continue writing, and "The Rat 2" would be forced to leave him alone. He would live out the rest of his days in a comfortable chair, maybe one of those dangling door-seats that babies used. He could bounce in the doorway and watch the Sox. No more goddamn fucking writing.

His chest swelled with relief as he lay down on the cold ground with his legs across the railroad tracks. Soon he heard the faint roar of the approaching train. The roar grew louder. He closed his eyes. There was a loud blast from the train's horn. The blast became a wail. He felt the wind blow back his hair as the train deftly severed his legs just below the waist, churning the blood-spurting appendages into sausage.

"I have finally retired from writing," Stephen King told his family and friends, from the sterile comfort of a mechanical hospital bed. "This time I'm serious."

He sat up in bed in the recovery room at the intensive care unit and finally began to enjoy his life. He watched TV, listened to music, was spoon-fed apple sauce and soup by attractive nurses, and read books propped up on a tray table beneath his chin, turning the pages with his tongue.

Bosco visited and they watched the Red Sox. There were no more demons tormenting Stephen King.

Until the rat returned, rousing him from sleep in the dead of night, pregnant with fresh ideas, gnawing at his brain. Gnawing. Gnawing and gnawing with its pointed yellow teeth.

Teeth. Yes. He still had his teeth. He could still battle the rat as long as he had his teeth.

His nurse, a slender blonde named Veronica, arrived to check on him in the morning.

"What would you like for breakfast, Mr. King?" Veronica asked. "More oatmeal with blueberries?"

"You know what I feel like, Veronica?" said Stephen King. "I feel like eating something sharp and delicious. Could you bring me a block of cheese?"

"Cheese?"

"The biggest block of cheese you can find! The one all the way in the back of the cooler!"

"All right, Mr. King...."

Veronica was used to unusual requests from her patients, and she knew this particular patient to be more unusual than usual. In half an hour she returned from the hospital cafeteria with a brick of orange cheddar the size of a shoebox.

"Let me get you a knife and fork," she said.

"You know what?" said Stephen King, a feeling of perverse enjoyment rising within him. "Just drop it on my tray here and push the tray toward

Wilderness House Literary Review 12/1

my face. I really feel like chomping this motherfucker down. Might just gnaw on it all day.”

“All right, Mr. King....”

Veronica set the cheese down on Stephen King’s tray table and nudged the tray toward his mouth. Her patient licked his lips and leaned forward.

When Veronica returned later to check Stephen King’s vitals, she found the author asleep, a twisted expression of pained satisfaction on his face. Curiously she peered down at the block of cheese. He had not eaten it. Instead it looked like he had simply chewed it, or bitten it rather, in what became clear as an oddly specific pattern. She leaned forward to look more closely. Stephen King had used his teeth to hack and bite jagged words into the cheese. She read aloud:

“Chapter One: The rat crawled out of his belly and began chewing his brain.”

“How do you like it?”

“Oh my God!” Her hand flew to her chest. She stumbled backward into his heart monitor. “You scared me.”

“Sometimes I scare myself,” he said. He grinned at her, his teeth caked with orange gobs. “Veronica,” said Stephen King. “I need more cheese.”