

TITLE BY DEFAULT

BY LEN KIRSCHNER

Len Kirschner
P.O. Box 293
Brightwood, Oregon 97011-0293
Folk.beat.frontier.com
(503) 888-4309

Abstract (short overview)

A writer suffers from self-doubt as he struggles to get any mileage on his next short story. Knocks at the door a stranger.

Permission Statement:

I, Len Kirschner, grant the following Creative Commons License to my manuscript:

Attribution-NoDerivs

This license lets others reuse the work for any purpose, including commercially; however, it cannot be shared with others in adapted form and credit must be provided to me.

Signed: Len Kirschner
April 27, 2020

TITLE BY DEFAULT

As a writer you never know what to expect if something you have written suddenly becomes successful. After I wrote *Almost Like Texas*, I was pleasantly surprised that the people in my burrow in the Oregon Cascades showed how much they respect my privacy. I can go to the post office and pick up the mail and people are most likely thinking of asking for an autograph or having a cellphone selfie taken with me but they just let me go about my business.

I have often bragged that in the thirty-three years that I've lived in my present location I have never had a single trick or treater on Halloween, my least favorite holiday. I was all settled in to write my next short story about flipping houses, manipulating real estate and what can go wrong if there is a lien against a property you purchase. It would be a departure from my past few writings and I was considering the research needed to be quite a challenge. I even had a title "Title by Default," that I could figure out how to insert into the plot at an opportune time.

I had cleared some time away to start and turned off the phone, which is a major distraction and was thinking I never appreciated how quiet it is here until I started writing. I blasted through three pages without stopping and then went to the kitchen to reheat some old coffee to assist me in getting maybe three more pages. I was walking back to the computer with the retro typewriter keyboard when I heard what I very seldom hear...a knock on the door.

The first words out of her mouth was "Where's your doorbell?" "Ah, may I help you?" I looked all over for your doorbell. "How long have you been here?" I asked. "Long enough to learn you don't have a doorbell," she said. "OK! How can I help you?" I repeated. "I have no place to go," she said. I didn't like this at all. This is worse than looking at my newsfeed when I'm in the writing process. "Where did you come from?", I said wanting to see her head back up the driveway and out of my life. She didn't answer and looked up at me with an expression more fitting for a stray dog.

She then bolted in the front door and went directly to the sofa, flopped herself down, and pulled out a cigarette. "Hey, get out of here," I said pointing my finger in the direction of the door. She put her smoke back in the pack and tossed the pack into her throw sack. "Do you have any coffee? We need some," she said. She came in uninvited and within less than a minute was telling me what to do. Fresh coffee was not a bad idea though. I was relieved that she wasn't smoking but she gave no intention of leaving either. I just stood and stared at her.

"Make some coffee. I'm sick of being in stories. That's why I'm here," she says in a voice that someone would use after arriving at a destination after a long trip. "Stories? What are you talking about?" "I just came from a story. The guy had me being promiscuous, contemptuous, an overall pretty foul character. I'm tired of being used in people's stories." The room was silent.

"So, where are you planning to stick me?" she asked. "Who exactly are you? How did you find my house?" "I'm Sunrise, or Sunny or whatever you wanted to call me." She seemed to have knowledge that wasn't possible for her or anybody else but me to have. I had written that name Sunrise or Sunny in my commonplace writer's tablet about two days ago. "Who are you?" I demanded. "Make some coffee," she requested again. Fresh coffee still seemed like a good idea. Wherever she came from she looked in need of something to relax her attitude.

I went to the kitchen and ground up some beans and got things going. I couldn't feel comfortable having someone walk into my house uninvited but I surprised myself by not throwing her out physically. She wasn't very tall, about 5'4" and wore designer torn jeans and a loose sweatshirt with an emblem of a casino that I've never heard of on the front. I looked outside at the bird feeder as I waited for two cups worth of coffee to be available. The Varied Thrush had returned. Several Juncos flew up to be fed joined by the ever-present Mountain Chickadees. "Do you take cream and sugar?" I asked. "Black and murky," was her reply.

I handed her the cup and by her return gaze I could tell why someone would say she's contemptuous. I took a deep breath and then "Listen, I don't know where you came from but after you finish your coffee you've got to go back. I'm in the middle of working on a story, I'm a writer, and I've got to get back to it," I said thinking that would send her away. "That's why I'm here," she said immediately. "You're writing a story and I want to make sure I'm not in it. Nothing. No mention of me or any character that resembles me because I know even if you say it's not me it would be me, so no, or hell no. Whatever it takes to have you leave me alone," she finished and went back to staring at her coffee cup. The room was silent. I didn't think she would leave easily.

"I've read your other stories. I don't like how you treat your characters, especially your female characters. You really should apologize to that girl in the Owosso story. No normal person can have that much sex and live to tell about it." I was taken aback. My first stalker and my first loss of peace and quiet. The cost of celebrity that catches up to you after a certain amount of success. "I see what you want. Do you want me to print out a story and autograph it for you or take a selfie on your cellphone with you?" I said as accommodating as I could at this point.

"I'm here to get out of your story. That's it." I was thinking quickly for anything to say at this point. "Isn't there someone I could call to come pick you up?" "I came from you and others like you. There is no one to call but you can call it off. Get me out of your story. Go to your notes and where ever Sunny or Sunrise is listed cross it off. Cross it off with a felt pen. You know a magic marker. It would be magic to me to get completely out of the next story and every other one thereafter. I want nothing to do with you and your writing."

After a quick pause she asked "Where were you going to stick me?" I started to be willing to play this game or whatever it was she was pulling off. "Sunny was going to be from the Warm Springs Reservation, I admitted feeling guilty for some reason. "What? She screamed. "I have short curly blonde hair, I'm white and you were going to put me on an Indian Reservation?" "I said

from Warm Springs, you know it's the word from. You would be living in Portland flipping houses in the Pacific Northwest. I would change your hair and your skin," I said. "And what else? I don't like men changing me. Only men put me in their stories. I've never had a woman put me in a story. That would be a refreshing break. Men have me abused, abandoned, beaten, raped, sold, stupid, pitiful and it's all pretty predictable. Nothing good comes from a woman character being in a man's imagination at least none that I've seen in my experiences. So, I want no part of it."

"You want a refill on that coffee?" I offered. She looked out the front window. "How exactly did you get here?" I asked again. "Check your yellow pad there. It's your fault." "Ok, who's stories have you been in?" I said trying to defuse the situation. "Author character privilege. I can't tell you. More than one I can say that. The experience has been always been bad," she said as if she had said this before. "Right now, I've got to get back to work," I countered. "Not with me involved," she shot back. We both sat looking across the room, sipping coffee and repositioning the conversation.

"If I made you male character would that be any better? I said in a negotiating tone. "Why would I want to be male? I'm not into gender swapping if that's what you're thinking. I want to be appreciated for who I am," she almost smiled but I guess it could be a grimace instead. I went back to the coffee cup taking smaller sips and holding it to my lips longer just to have something else to do for that brief moment. "

"What would you think if I take you out of the story and put someone else in?" I was thinking I was getting someplace now. "It would still be me. You may try to fool yourself but it would be me. From what I've read you don't have enough depth to do anything else." "What if it's a guy?" I said. "It won't be. It would be me masquerading as a guy and I told you I'm not into that."

I took a deep breath. I really need to get back to work. She just sat there holding her empty coffee cup and staring at me with a stiff jaw. She pulled out the pack of cigarettes pulled one out and looked at me and then put it back in the pack and into the throw sack. "I've really got to get back to

work.” I thought her eyes were getting teared up but I could have been wrong about that. It was quiet.

“I’ll make you a deal I’ll be in this one last story if you promise to do something...kill me off,” she seemed excited about this prospect. “The sooner in the story the better I like it. I don’t want to be humiliated and then killed just killed fast. So, how would you like me to do that? How about you have me die at birth?” “Then how would I use you in the story?” I sincerely asked. I could see her complexion turning red. Maybe I could have her from the Reservation without changing anything. “That’s what I mean. You want to “use” me in the story and rest assured the reason I’m here is to stop you from doing that.”

“OK, OK, OK....lets try to agree on something. You are in the story but you get killed somehow.” She pondered this. “Hell, I could probably get killed by having someone read your draft and having them tell you to drop the idea all together. How does that sound?” I saw her swallow. I did the same.

Twenty seconds must have passed. “Has anyone told you that you are quite snarky?” I said seeing a quality I had not developed into her potential character. “Oh, hell yes, I’ve had all those negative qualities written in far too many times.” “OK, how do you want to die?” I said expecting a smile which I did not get. I had some ideas of my own and they didn’t involve the story. “What about if I eat a real estate contract and die from ink poisoning?” “I’m serious. How do you want to die? Let’s settle on something,” I said searching for resolution

She adjusted her position on the sofa and displayed a look of total dejection. She threw down the side pillow kicked off her shoes and laid down on the sofa. “Can I call you Sunny?” I asked. “You’re the damn author you can call me whatever you want and you probably will so yeah, I don’t care.” “OK Sunny why don’t we pick how you will die, then I’ll heat up some chicken soup for lunch if you are hungry, and then I go back and release this story from my creative mind,” I raised up my arms for emphasis. “Release is something you do with a bowel movement but maybe I underestimated your own view of your

own writing because that would be spot on,” she said without the trace of a smile.

“You’re going to have to eat at the table,” I said. “I don’t want any soup being spilled on the sofa.” She bound to her feet “Do you think I have a shaky hand or were you planning to give me some nerve cell malfunction disease?” She sat down at the long table. I sat as far away as the table would allow. She took one spoonful of the soup. “This ain’t from five and a half week old chickens is it?” I didn’t reply. I wanted to see where she was going with this.

“Those chickens are fed antibiotics in mass production and are so heavy they can’t even stand up when they are sacrificed for your Chicken Soup.” “It’s not those chickens,” I said. “I doubt that,” she said while finishing off the bowl.

She went to the back porch where she finally lit that cigarette. She started giving me advice which I thought would be a nice change. “You ever try Flash Fiction?” she asked. “Is that anything like flash cards? I said.” “It’s you know, the economy of language. Real short just a couple words. Your whole book would be one sentence. That way your characters wouldn’t have to drink from the cup of sorrow.” The expression did not change of her face. “Here’s an example, I suck, the end,” She said with authority.

“What’s the difference in those two birds?” She asked. I knew better than to appear to know anything about anything so I offered “I’ll go get the bird identification book.” I came back out and flipped through the pages for a minute or two. “That one that feeds upside down is a White-breasted Nuthatch and the other one is a White-crowned sparrow. There’s a whole family of those here. They just arrived from wherever they were all winter.”

“Do you keep the feeder stocked?” she asked. “It’s stocked right now isn’t it?” “This white stuff on the rails, do they crap all over your porch?” She asked thoughtfully. “That they do. In fact, I keep the power washer here to hose it down every couple of days.” She seemed to be in deeper thought.

“Do you think you could write me in as a bird? Can you give me your word you will write me in as a bird?” I thought about getting back to work and wanted to take every risk to making that happen. “How would I include a bird

in a story about real estate?” She was looking very agitated. “You can find a way.” She then looked at me with the sternest fact possible and awaited my answer. I inhaled deeply in disgust “OK, I give you my word,” I said. Then I added “how about as a Crow?” I chuckled. She was quiet. I turned to look at her and she wasn’t there as if I had been talking to myself the whole time.

I went back to the computer with the retro typewriter keyboard and went to the first line of the story. I started “*There was a White-crowned sparrow that landed on the porch railing of the recent foreclosure.*” I looked around to make sure I was alone. I closed out the document and haven’t returned to it since.

I went outside to the bird feeder. “I better keep this stocked at all times just in case,” I thought as I turned on the power washer scattering the birds away in all directions.