

His Winter Came In Spring

My Brother's Confession – June 6, 2002

NOTE: This story won a grand prize for short fiction. Beware, though. It addresses a very strong, even dark subject matter. It is not recommended for young people to read. If you do take the time to read this story, please send me an email with your thoughts.

I am here, in this water, with four candles and the tools and the books. The water, I hope, will relax my body, if not my conscience.

The books are my friends – my only friends.

The tools? I have but two: this pen and this razor blade. I am not really sure which to use. Either way you bleed.

But writing is harder than living.

I know. I have tried both, and here I am, trying yet again. Though I think, tonight, I am struggling with my last chapter.

"Write the truest words you know." Hemmingway taught me that.

"I am a cripple. I have been a cripple for all of my 17 years. Polio is a blight, but there are worse diseases. My stepfather had a worse disease... or a worse disease had him. Either way, he thought he could keep me here forever. He thought I was too helpless or too afraid. He was wrong."

I can only find 58 (really) true words. They bleed naturally enough from the point of my pen. But what is to come next? It is at this very place my technique always suffers.

Jon Franklin says that I have to present a problem. He says the reader will "never be on your side so solidly as immediately following an exciting, tension producing complication."

I would really like to get some readers on my side. I would really like to get anyone on my side, and I do have lots of complications, but this whole complication/resolution formula seems so artificial.

I think my life is more like: complication/more complications/partial resolution/greater complications and then despair.

I cannot sell that story.

Still, here's a complication for you. Yesterday my Mother was arrested; they charged her with murder.

More complications: the victim was my stepfather.

Partial resolution: my Mother is innocent.

Greater complication: I am the killer.

Despair: I think that's what I'm feeling right now.

My stepfather deserved it; my Mother did not. My stepfather hurt us. I mean he really hurt us, though I think he hurt me most of all.

For 11 years he raped me.

I think it was partially my fault, but I am not sure. I did try to leave, when I was nine, but he found me and he locked me away.

It was just a bleak little room beneath the house, but it could have been worse. Shakespeare lives here, and Faulkner, and Wolfe, and others.

They live in water-stained, cardboard boxes, heaped carelessly at the foot of my cot.

I share them with the cockroaches.

The cockroaches favor the red and blue colored ink on the outside. I favor the black and white meat on the inside. It is an unholy compromise.

But my nights have been an endless dialog with the Lords of Writ. They are my friends, my counselors, my teachers.

And when HE would come, when that MAN would come into my room, I would hold tightly, I would hold so tightly onto their every word.

And in the morning, when that MAN would leave, I would take my pen, and etch out the remains of my soul on long yellow pads.

And in the afternoon, when William would come, I would push it all away, push away the memory of those HANDS.

We would talk, but never about that MAN. We would talk like regular boys and pretend that I was normal.

William was my stepbrother. He was a regular boy.

I thought he was safe. Surely that MAN could not hurt his own flesh, the way he hurt me.

I think I might have endured more, lasted longer, if things had stayed the same. But on May 8th, exactly 42 days ago, everything changed.

John Gardner taught me that every story has three acts. I think this is true of mine, but really ACT 3 is all that matters now. So let me move quickly through the others.

In the bottom of ACT 1, my (real) Dad dies. It is ugly. It is AIDS.

ACT 2 begins exactly 487 days later, when my Mother remarries.

I think he makes her feel better. I do not think she loves him; I think she needs him. I do not think he loves her; I think he needs me.

He came to me just three days after the wedding. He told me I was a good kid. He told me he loved me. He told me to bend over the bed.

He was not the multi-layered, part-good, part-evil conflicted character of quality literature. He was an archetype. Flat. One-dimensional. Carnivorous.

Henry James would not write about such a man. I cannot describe such a man – only his hands. They were tender, groping, sweet smelling.

I hated his HANDS.

After he left, I vomited – first on my pillow, and then on my long yellow pad.

The next morning he repented.

"I am sorry. I am so, so sorry." The words dribbled down his face like salty tears as he folded those HANDS and begged God to "deliver thy servant from this wickedness."

I wish God had listened -- even to HIM. God has not listened to me, especially to me.

I have often thought that God is like my Mother. Where has she been when I needed her most?

I know better, now.

Still, I rarely pray, since my Dad died. And even then, I do not mention my sickness or my Stepfather. Somehow, I know that God is not to blame for either disease.

I do ask about my writing.

Crippled or not, Byron was a Lord, but it was not the title that made him so; it was the writing. Unknown and broke, Thoreau died a failure, but someone discovered his journals, and today he is immortal.

I want to be known; I want to be read. I have asked God to help me sell a story.

ACT 3 began forty-two days ago. That is when William wrote his first story, "My Winter Came In Spring."

William visited most afternoons. He brought me the only medicine that mattered: Pads and pens. He took my stories to the mailbox, and he brought me back the woeful rejection letters – twenty-seven of them.

William had read each of my stories, but he had never written one himself. He did not need to write; he could live.

But forty-two days ago, William came to me and he was different. He handed me a crumpled yellow sheet. It was a story, just a simple piece, but it was much too artful for a regular boy.

William left suddenly. His eyes shuffled away before I could ask. But I knew...

And I could not bear the knowing.

I thank God for my real Dad. He was a Writer and an English Professor, a nearly famous Rhodes Scholar, and he left me in the care of Aristotle.

Aristotle taught me about plot. He said it was an arrangement of incidents, which led to a conclusion that was both "inevitable and unexpected."

Inspired by such counsel I devised a plot. It was unexpected, if not inevitable.

It was unexpected, because no one thought I could drag my pathetic 97-pound frame up thirteen formidable stairs.

They were mostly right. Over the years, my legs have twisted into a mangled knot.

But I was determined.

Oliver Lafarge says "that man after man gives it up and turns aside; the ones who stay with it have the guts."

Thirty-seven days ago, when the rest of the family, had left for work or school, I began to train.

By the end of week one, I made it up to the 6th stair.

By the end of week two, I was tottering on the 9th.

By the end of week three, I conquered the top step.

I was, I think, for the first time, proud.

That very night HE came... It was the same as always, the HANDS, the nauseous confession, the prayer.

It was the same for him, but it was not the same for me. When he left, I did not take up my pen.

Instead, I lay quietly, plotting.

I knew when he would visit William, and I knew what I would do.

On Friday, Mother would be gone to work – that MAN would come home and visit me, but if not me, then William.

This is what I did.

8:00 – He has not visited me. And so I begin my long ascent up to the regular world.

8:35 – I am on the 6th step - trembling. My arms are throbbing. I am afraid.

8:45 – The seventh step assaults me. I lose my grip and crash.

9:05 – I am awake. I am exhausted. But I drag myself upward toward the bottom step.

9:40 – The seventh step yields way. With my right hand I scoop up my withered legs and rest them on the eighth.

10:10 – I am at the top, and I am hoisting myself up by the porcelain doorknob. The door, itself, is unlocked.

10:20 – I am now on the kitchen floor, scratching my way across the cold linoleum towards the den.

Chekhov had a shotgun, and so did my Dad; I know where he kept it.

10:41 – The cabinet is locked, but the door has a glass pane. I smash through it. This weapon feels so heavy.

? – Time is running out. I try to move more quickly, but my arms are filled with molten lead. The room is fading.

10:55 – I am awake now; my vision is blurred and it is hard to breath, but I am on the move again.

11:05 – I am in the hall. I cannot carry the gun. Instead, I inch it ahead, then plant my elbows and drag myself forward.

11:15 – I am at the door to William's room; it is ajar. I hear them before I see them.

William is sobbing “Dear God, oh God, please, no more...” My stepfather is repenting. “Dear Lord, I ask thee, only this once more, to forgive thy...”

11:50 – I am finally able to will myself into the room. The horror before me is too much.

William is stretched half naked across the bed. Bloodstained rivulets of semen weep down the back of his smooth, hairless thighs.

That MAN is on his knees. His head is bowed. His eyes are swollen. His lips are bloated.

And his HANDS... his hands are folded, clenched, sticky with sin and tears.

The pit of my stomach twists into a sickened knot. I feel a sudden urge to write.

But I cannot.

I must KILL THE HANDS.

Footsteps? I hear footsteps in the hallway. Who could be coming?

I cannot wait.

I must KILL THE HANDS.

The gun seems suddenly lighter. I brace the stock against the door jam, and angle the barrel forward.

The trigger soothes my finger, eases the agony in my soul. This is not difficult.

But the steps are growing closer.

I fire.

In a single instant, two desperate prayers are answered: William is free and my stepfather is cured.

I fire again.

I do not hear the sound of the blast, but I see the shredded flesh; I see the splintered stubs. He writhes there heaving and choking, until at last his eyes find mine.

I cannot answer their question. I feel no revenge. I feel no relief. I feel no remorse.

My death came long before his.

I am tired, I am so tired. I feel the gun slipping, I glimpse a familiar face, and then the room just drifts into darkness.

How could I have known?

How could I have known that my Mother would return so soon?

How could I have known that she would carry me down the stairs and hide me? How could I have known that she would wipe away my prints and replace them with her own? How could I have known that she would take it upon herself to rewrite MY final scene?

Somehow, my plot got away from me. It always does – but my Mother is not a killer.

I am.

It was me.

And if I have failed to write a good story, at least I have lived within one. And I have learned something.

I think I know, now, why my work has been rejected.

You cannot plot a story; a story must plot itself.

And I think mine is at its end.

I am done with the pen. It is time for the blade.

-- Stephen Collins

A Note To The Editor: My Name is William Terrell Maxwell. I found this note, four years ago, along with the body of my stepbrother. I submitted it, to the Superior Court Of Massachusetts, and upon further investigation, all charges against my Mother were dropped. I am submitting it, now, to you. Please consider publishing it as a work of short fiction, but please do not change the names.