

Happy Not Writing

Gary Smith

John tapped the ballpoint pen against his chin, purposefully not looking at the blank page in front of him. He had forgotten the difficulty of writing the first few words. He hadn't sat in front of a blank page like this in over forty-five years.

John's focus drifted continuously away from what he should be writing and towards why he hadn't written for such a long period of time. His reason for not writing could be pronounced loudly with one word: life. Or, to be more precise, a life of happiness.

The last forty-five years had been spent with his family. His world had revolved around Amelia, the most amazing wife of all time, and their two perfect children. They'd had one boy and one girl, just like Amelia had always wanted.

To say that life had been perfect would be untruthful, but it's been close. Growing up in turmoil and dysfunction deeper than the Mariana Trench had left him ill prepared for a happy adult life. Becoming accustomed to love deeply felt, communicated, and mutually enjoyed had taken at least ten of the last forty-five years.

The only thing that he ever missed had been his writing. He hadn't missed it strong enough to choose writing over dinner with his family, tucking his children in every night, or always laying down at the same time as his wife. But, he had missed it.

Amelia not only encouraged John to write, but often insisted, until he found himself seated with pen and paper on the coffee table in front of him, or in his office at his large dust covered desk. Before the first sentence could ever be completed to his satisfaction, John had to get up and join his family at the dinner table or around the fireplace because he didn't feel whole without being near them.

This day was different. On this day he was going to force himself to write. He wouldn't allow himself to get up until at least one perfect paragraph had been written. Then, and only then, would he go to his family and show them what he had written.

Finally, John began to write. He wrote quickly. He wrote from his heart. He wrote as if the words had always been in the pen, and he was placing them where they belonged.

He sat back with a sigh and read over what he had written, softly placed his pen beside the page, wadded the page into a tight ball, exposing a fresh sheet underneath, and tossed the written page in the trash can beside his desk. It was not good enough. It was not something he wanted to show his family.

The pen sat in the same position for hours, as did John. He was staring at an ink stain on his right hand when the perfect words struck him. The words hit him so hard that he would have sworn it was a physical slap from a long invisible hand, had he believed in ghosts, or supernatural powers of invisibility.

John quickly picked his pen back up and wrote faster, and surer, than before. Every word flowed down his arm, through his hand, and onto the page in an endless stream. The words were so natural that John would have explained his state of mind as trance-like, zombie brained, or zonked. There was no conscious thought or effort needed, and John wrote without allowing something pesky, like thoughts, get in the way.

With the last word written, John's trance ended. He sat back, softly replaced his pen in its previous position and gave the exact same sigh as before. He didn't immediately read what he had written, for fear that the result would be the same as the first time. The first copy had felt perfect as he wrote it too.

Still unable to read what he had written, John pushed his chair back, softly so he wouldn't alert his family that he was getting up. They would assume he was done and want to see what he had written. John stood and walked the short distance to his small office drink station, consisting entirely of one bottle of whiskey and one glass tumbler beside an office lamp on a side table.

He twisted the cap from the bottle and poured two fingers worth of whisky into the tumbler. After replacing the cap, John took his drink back to his desk and placed it beside his pen as he sat back down.

I'll only drink if this is as good as I think it is, he thought. Not a drop until it's perfect.

John picked up the page and began to read. His lips moved, as always, when he read his own writing. Doing so helped him imagine the words being spoken, even if he couldn't hear his voice. What he had written covered less than half of the page, but before he was done reading a smile had formed and his eyes had grown misty.

Downing the whisky, John pushed his chair back, not caring about the noise this time, and stood. He quickly placed the empty glass back on the table next to his pen and left his office. He turned left outside of his office door and started down the stairs of the house that his family had lived in for so long.

As he got to the bottom of the stairs he saw that his family had noticed the noise of him getting up and leaving his office. They stood in a line waiting for him. He stopped and was unable to keep the mist in his eyes from turning into tears as he looked at them. They were his world.

At first his oldest child, his daughter, the exact image of her mother, looked worried and about to ask about his tears. When she noticed his smile, she understood and smiled back. She had seen her dad cry with joy often over the years and knew him to be softer than a marshmallow.

She adjusted her first child, John's first granddaughter, on her right hip and held out her left hand. John placed his first written work in forty-five years in her hand without a second of thought, and reached for his granddaughter. John's granddaughter was the only thing that could cause his already swelling heart to swell even more.

His daughter read what he had written and began to cry as well.

"Oh, dad," she said, "This is perfect. Reading this tomorrow will make Mom's funeral the family celebration she always said that it should be."