

BOOKSTORIES

Chapter 1 Excerpt

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I got one!”

Bobby’s exclamation resulted in a few turned heads and several groans from the various rows of desks in the smoke-filled junior editorial bullpen of Tandem Bike Publishing. Most went right back to their towering stacks of thick manilla-envelope submissions, trying to decipher whether they had something worth passing up to the assistant editors for further inspection. But three dropped their reading and headed in Bobby’s direction.

Dottie was the first to reach him—of course she was. She’d known exactly what Bobby’s announcement meant.

“Are you sure? Is it them?” Dottie asked, her cigarette nearly singeing the paper as she reached for the slim stack in Bobby’s hand.

“Of course I’m sure, darling! Here, I’ll trade you,” Bobby replied as he handed her the manuscript in exchange for her cig. “Ugh, how do you smoke these things? Filters are ridiculous. It’s the smoking equivalent of getting a hand job with a woolen sock.”

He tore off the lipstick-stained end of Dottie’s L&M and sucked down half the tobacco in one long drag.

“I thought you were quitting,” Ted remarked as he pulled his chair up next to Bobby’s desk.

“It’s a special occasion. I finally got one!” Bobby smiled. “Just don’t tell my mother you caught me smoking.”

Gail, the last of the usual foursome of fans, deposited herself on Ted’s knee. “Your secret’s safe with us. Now, catch us up! What’s this one about?”

“Sailors and boats,” said Bobby, wagging his eyebrows and loosening his collar.

“Shipyards and longshoremen,” Dottie corrected him, already turning to the second page.

Gail began humming “All the Nice Girls Love a Sailor,” and Bobby joined in.

“Shh! All of you, shut it.” It was Lorn, one row over. “I’m trying to read here. You’re all crazy to waste your time with the crap that guy sends in anyway.”

“You have no vision, Lorn! And we all know that you hide pages torn out of *Playboy* in the manuscripts when you get bored. Nothing wrong with a little *Playboy*, Lorn! Good articles! No need to hide it!” Ted yelled in reply.

“And the author could be a woman, Lorn,” Gail added. “We exist beyond the centerfolds of your girly magazines.”

Lorn grumbled but also turned beet red, pushing the top drawer of his desk shut with a guilty sidelong glance.

After this, they all fell silent as Dottie read. As she turned to page four, she sighed and shook her head.

“The imagery with the coiled rope?” Bobby asked.

“Yeah,” she responded in a whisper.

The writing was so brilliant, it required some reverent silence. Reading this author’s work made Dottie think of standing near the huge bank of votive candles at St. Pat’s Cathedral, surrounded by soft, warm illumination. Each flame an intention all its own,

but together creating something beautiful, a whole bigger than the sum of its parts. Enough to warm a person on a cold day.

Dottie flipped through the pages faster and exponentially faster, like gravity pulling, tumbling young Alice down the rabbit hole. And then, like always, when she was lost in the story, she reached the end of a page.

And Alice's descent into Wonderland abruptly jerked to a stop. She was left hanging there, suspended among the teacups and pocket-watch gears, and she would never set one silk-slipped foot into the Mad Hatter's party or anywhere else.

The story didn't have an ending.

They never did.

Dottie handed the manuscript off to Gail and Ted and slumped onto the corner of Bobby's desk. The story, like the author's other submissions, was incredibly real and immersive. Dottie felt like she could hear the water of the Hudson lapping against the pilings below the dock, smell the oily smoke from the ship engines. But any sense of the author themselves? Nothing. It was maddening.

"Wow, right?" Bobby asked.

Dottie nodded and walked back to her desk to get a new cigarette. She glanced down at the submission she had been reading before Bobby sounded the alarm. It was a little romance set on some island in Alaska. The writer's cover letter spoke of how everything Hawaiian had become a fad since the island's recent ratification as a state. She felt that Alaska, also having just officially joined the US of A, was equally deserving of some love and attention. Dottie thought she had a point. The Alaska angle could be a good hook, and what she had read of it so far was a fun romp in the Alaskan wilderness with a GI and a local tomboy of a gal. She could tell the author was really earnest about wanting others to fall in love with Alaska like she had.

Compared to what she had just read, though, the Alaskan romance felt flat. But at least it would presumably have an actual ending. And at least she knew something about the author. Even without the benefit of the cover letter, Dottie was always able to pick up an understanding of the writer as she read their work.

Whenever Dottie read something, it was like she got little brief glimpses into the mind of the author. It had always been that way for her, even when she was a little girl. She had thought everyone felt and knew these things, and only slowly realized as she got older that they didn't. She could tell the author's gender, even when the name given was just a first initial. She could tell if they were writing from their own experience, if they were inspired by having read about something, or if they were making it up. She could tell how the person felt when they were writing it. It just came to her, a mist of other knowledge that crept in from the edges when she took in the story on the page. Sometimes, it rolled in quietly, getting denser with detail as she read. Other times, it came in fast and intense, a thunderstorm that blew in on an otherwise sunny day.

Some of the saddest people wrote the funniest prose. Those who were fearful of the world wrote of bravery especially well. Those who were lonely wrote of family and love like no other.

Dottie looked over at her friends passing the pages of the new story to one another. She took another drag from her cigarette, held it between her pursed lips as she straightened the pages of the Alaskan story she had thrown aside as she ran to answer Bobby's call. She let herself fall back into the swirling eddy of details she picked up on from that author. She was a young transplant from a different area, probably in her late teens. When Dottie read her work, she could feel her appreciation for Alaska, not as a first home but as an adopted homeland. She was from a military family; the bits about the GI rang true and were written with an ease and confidence that no amount of research could

provide. As for her age, Dottie felt the girl's youth, her moments of self-consciousness when it came to the romance, which she had very little personal experience with so far. Oh, and she was used to being an outsider of sorts that extended beyond being a military kid. Dottie couldn't put her finger on exactly how, not yet anyway, but would likely be able to by the end.

Yet Dottie could barely pick up anything about the writer who never finished a story but sent them in anyway. She didn't know their gender, their emotional state, or anything else. Dottie and her three pals in the editorial pool—all fans of the mysterious author—guessed the writer was a fellow New Yorker. The postmarks were from all over the city, and almost all the stories were based somewhere in the Five Boroughs. The detail involved spoke to someone who knew the locations intimately. The author was probably well educated or, at the very least, well read because the quality of the writing was remarkable. If it hadn't been, the unfinished short stories would have been quickly tossed aside to the gals who sent the courtesy rejection letters to the return addresses.

The problem was, there was never a return address with these stories. They were also never signed. Even if anyone at Tandem Bike had wanted to publish the stories, there was no way to get in touch with the author.

Dottie often wondered, *Who writes something and sends it to a publishing house with no hope of getting an acceptance letter and a contract in return?*

Probably the same type of writer who never finished a damn story.

And there wasn't even a common theme beyond the geography. One story was about a young mother named Maria. Originally from Argentina, Maria ran a little grocery store with her husband, but she secretly harbored dreams of being an inventor. She lugged her kids around on public transportation to the library

every week so she could read periodicals about engineering and mechanics and check out vehicle manuals. She tinkered with their delivery truck and with the appliances at home and then sketched out her thoughts about how to make them work better. She imagined building a child from metal and wires and small hydraulics who would be able to run and play like the children of her own flesh. The story cut off right as the woman was picking her way through the aisles of a hardware store, with no excuse to be there at all save for dreaming.

Another featured an older man named Albert who was in love with his young milkman, Jerry. He thought about Jerry all the time, hoped he was having a good day, and tried to find ways to make his life easier. Albert gave him gifts, like the quality long johns for cold mornings that he told Jerry were a birthday gift that didn't fit him and he thought Jerry could use. He gave Jerry a box of chocolates, saying they were from a client of his but he didn't care for peanuts. When the younger man mentioned what diner he liked to go to on payday for the Friday-night pot-roast special, the older man worked up the courage to go and planned to play it off as a chance meeting. If Jerry invited him to sit with him, Albert would insist on picking up the tab. It would almost feel like a date.

But Albert only stood across the street from the diner and never went in, because he saw Jerry through the window as he blushed and flirted respectfully with the sweet waitress. Albert went home. He saw Jerry the following Monday morning, as usual, and they talked about the ball game. Jerry got back in his truck, and Albert walked to the corner and caught the bus to work, thinking about him still. That was where the story ended, with no indication of whether they ever had that pot-roast date.

Even if that story had been finished, Dottie and everyone else knew no one would have published the one-sided love story when both sides were men. But it was one of the best love stories Dottie had ever read.

Yet she still couldn't tell anything at all about the author who wrote the stories.

Dottie had become the keeper of the stories, which she kept in a thick brown folder tied with string in the bottom drawer of her desk. Well, all except the story of the man and his milkman. Bobby held onto that one. After a few too many drinks one night, he had told her how it made him cry with hope.

"That someone out there could understand what it's like . . . and could write it that beautifully? It makes me feel like someday . . . it will be okay. It will be okay for the Alberts of the world and maybe for me too."

All the unfinished stories were so real and so alive. The new one about the longshoreman was as well.

When Dottie returned to her friends, they had just finished making plans to meet up after work at a local burger-and-beer dive.

"Bring the whole folder, Dottie. Tonight, we are going to figure this mystery out once and for all!" Ted exclaimed with grandiosity, nearly spilling Gail from his lap.

Dottie stopped at home to change out of her work clothes before heading out to meet her friends. She dodged her father's newspaper-shaking tirade about how the US needed to be less worried about what Russia was doing in space and more worried about what it was doing in Cuba. Dottie deftly danced around her mother's not-so-subtle attempt to get her to agree to a lunch date with the son of one of the ladies she knew from their temple's ladies' auxiliary.

"Think about it, Dorothy! He's a med student at NYU!" she yelled as Dottie closed the door behind her.

Dottie wasn't thinking about dates. She was thinking about the unfinished stories. Sometimes, they seemed more real to her than real life. She thought about the young mother, Maria. Ted had a theory that her tale was influenced by science fiction and

possibly even *The Twilight Zone* television show, but Dottie saw that the robot details were not the focus at all. It was all about the main character's incredible mind and her dreams. She thought of Albert's unselfish love for Jerry and the expansive longing he kept neatly buttoned up and tucked away day in and day out. She thought of the newest story and the sailor who was anchored by his responsibilities but wanted to run away on a freighter and never step foot on land again. They were so real and alive to the author, Dottie felt like she knew them. She was so lost in thought, she missed her subway stop and had to get off at the next and walk the extra few blocks, worried she would be late.

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