



THE NOVELIST

By Chris Orcutt

You have always wanted to write a novel, and here you are, deep in the cinder-block bowels of a high school, late at night, pecking away on an IBM Selectric.

In your dreamy and uninspired days (about two months ago) you would never have imagined a converted yearbook room in a high school as the place where you would write your first novel. You, like all the other cocktail-napkin poets of the world, envisaged a wood and stone cottage overlooking a craggy bluff on the sea as the milieu for your masterpiece. But you are no longer one of these toddlers of prose, one of these sprinters who twist their ankles; you are a novelist, a marathoner, an unfaltering testament to discipline. Where you write is inconsequential, you say; that you write is all that matters.

Until four months ago, you were gainfully employed, even respected, as the lone reporter for the Willowbrook Chronicle. You were a good reporter, your editors wrote in the recommendation they gave you when you left, a dependable reporter who "wrote interesting news and feature articles quickly and well," and who, unofficially, made the best pot of coffee in the office.

Community leaders like the mayor, the town supervisor, and the owner of the delicatessen frequently consulted you on important matters, like how much Tabasco sauce to put into the buffalo wings. Indeed, you were feared for your incisive questions and wry wit. You certainly showed that pack of rubes at your last village board meeting. When Joan Packer, village clerk, told you it was none of your business how much the village spent last year scraping dog-doo off the sidewalks, you snarled, "Lose some weight," and left to become a novelist.

You, a college graduate summa cum laude, moved upstate to your parents' sprawling Victorian home in Chestnut Ridge. There are no more American Chestnut trees on the ridge that encircles the town because they were wiped out by a Chinese Chestnut fungus at the turn of the century. But you try to forget this fact and force a smile as you drive into town.

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Your father is principal of the Chestnut Ridge High School, and not being against nepotism, puts you on the substitute teacher list for the district. Even novelists, he says, need pocket money. This is true, and a week later, you have your first assignment substituting in an industrial arts class. Strange, because you never thought of a bunch of kids sawing wood as an art.

But alas, you did not come to Chestnut Ridge to tarry with acne-infested intellectual midgets! You are a novelist and must start behaving like one. You must write a novel. The time is now. Carpe diem!

You begin one brisk winter afternoon on an IBM Selectric typewriter in the teachers' lounge. It is not much of a lounge with the cracked red vinyl couches and the circa 1970 Coke machine in the corner, but this doesn't matter. You are writing a novel.

You purloin a ream of bond paper from the typing room and are now fortified for the toilsome task ahead. But first, you have to take a leak. Then, some coffee. Then, another leak. Finally you tell yourself no more coffee and no more leaks until you write five pages, then you can have all the coffee and take all the leaks you want.

And you do. You write your first five pages. You write the next five. Soon the teachers begin to notice. They wonder what you have been typing for the past two weeks. They try to peek over your shoulder when you are typing, but you sense their spying and quickly cover your writing with a blank sheet of paper. They are not writers, and certainly not novelists, you tell yourself; and as non-writers,

they do not deserve to know about what you are writing, nor how many pages you have finished. So you hide your manuscript in a folder in your leather satchel as the pages pile up.

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Crisis. Your father informs you that several teachers have been covertly complaining about your presence in the faculty room. As if you were a member of the Gestapo, they fear you will hear everything they say and squeal to your father. This is nonsense. You are a writer, and as a writer, you are interested in writing and nothing else. That the teachers think you would waste ATP molecules, tie up brain cells with such a miniscule matter as their banal jabber is repulsive to you. You think of cutting a few of them down to size with your wit like a well-sharpened hatchet, but you reconsider because your father is the principal and has to work with these people. So, instead, your father, ever supportive of your mission as a novelist, finds a new place for you to write.

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He wakes you one December morning with the snow blowing against the window like fine sand to tell you that school has been delayed an hour, and that he has secured a new room for you in which to write. It is the "old yearbook room." He says he will put an IBM Selectric in the room and give you your own key for easy access. That morning the two of you drive up to school together to open the room. No one has been in the room since 1982.

Your and your father's footsteps echo in the empty halls of the early morning high school. The snow has stopped outside, and yellow sun pours into the glass hallway through which you now walk. You see all the dust in the air. You don't see the dust most of the time, but it is there, you tell yourself.

You round a corner to the left, pass the library on the right, and wedged between the library and Godfrey Jones' social studies classroom is the old yearbook room. Your father reminds you that this room has not been opened since

1982, the year they moved the yearbook operations to the library office. He pauses at the door with the key. Obviously he feels this moment is tantamount to the opening of the Tomb of Tutankhamen.

"This is strange, isn't it?" he asks you, holding the ring of keys ready for the unsealing of the vault.

"Yes, it is," you say.

He tries the key, but the door does not open. He has the wrong key, he says, and marches back to his office to find the right one. He finds it, in the school safe. He returns and opens the door.

You reach in and grope in the dark for the light switch. Already you smell the dust, which is angry at you for having disturbed it after 11 years of peace. And then the lights flicker and you are greeted by a dusty black steel cabinet, covered with old yearbooks dating from 1982 back to 1961, the year the school was built. A TV, one of those behemoth early jobs, sits on a rolling cart next to a genuine imitation walnut veneer table, also snowed with gray dust. Other treasures festoon the drab blue closet: a broken Royal typewriter on a steel filing cabinet, a rickety steel typing table, a steel garbage can stained with paint (probably last used in an art class, you surmise), and a can of Hawaiian Punch. The can of punch looks like the baby brother of the garbage can and the filing cabinet, resting snugly between them on the floor. The can, like everything else in the room except the table, is constructed of steel, and was most likely left in the room because the room's last inhabitants wished to leave artifacts that could endure the onslaught of dust that now makes you and your father sneeze simultaneously now.

"I'll get the typewriter," your father says. You detect disappointment in his voice when he leaves for your writing instrument. There are no riches in your writing room; only dust and a can of punch that, after 11 years, is probably spoiled anyway.

Yet you keep the can of punch and his steel siblings in the room with you as reticent friends who cheer you on by their silence. Now and then you place the can of punch on the table beside your typewriter and talk to it about characters or plot problems. The can listens, and the path you should take with your novel becomes clear. You type on, and the stack that is your manuscript grows.

One evening, alone as usual, you become curious about the size of your writing room. When asked by friends where you are working on your novel, you tell them the old yearbook room. But you know this is vague. They ask how big (or small) it is and you cannot tell them. So with your arms outstretched that evening, you approximated the length and width of your room and came up with 15 feet by 6 feet. With all the clutter, there is not much room for air, so you keep the door open as often as possible. Only during the school day, when classes are in session, do you keep the door shut and endure the stifling air.

But a writer, and especially a novelist, cannot sit in his writing room every moment. You need to stand up and take a walk for a while. Breathe a little. Get a Coke. Take a leak.

You walk down the hall during the day, hunched over from so many hours in your clattering doldrums, avoiding eye contact with teachers or the many cynics who are suspicious of what you are doing in the mysterious yearbook room. Students, however, are another matter, especially the female ones. Several coquettish young beauties say hello to you as you pass in the hall, and you reply with your most charming hello, mouthed gently at their lips by yours, glistening with your saliva and your sweat from your labor as a novelist.

At night, the halls are deserted. You walk where you please, less afraid of the dark than you are during the day of the nosy skeptics. The "EXIT" signs are friendly beacons poised over the doorways at each end of the 100-yard-long corridor that runs outside your writing room. The signs glow warmly into the locker-flanked hallway and guide you in your

quest to get a Coke down in the teachers lounge.

Occasionally you hear screams and the chirps of sneakers emanating from the gym and know that a basketball game is in progress. You walk with head down through the shadowy hallways, hoping no one will accost you and demand to know what you are doing wandering the school at night like the misanthrope you are. No one does though. Like science books tell you about sharks and snakes, people in the building are more scared of you than you are of them. This is good, you think as you zip your fly and flush, because you are a novelist and do not enjoy wasting your words with people; you want to save your words for paper. Those frightened rabbits who huddle together near the entrance to the gym do not question you because they are afraid, and you are glad for the fear you put into them.

Sometimes teachers knock on your door during the day, probably because they feel obliged to say hello, to pay their respects to you, the novelist. Before you began this novel business, you were an amiable guy; the fun, clever son-of-a-principal who listened and was not a smart-ass. It seems to you now that the teachers who drop by to see you retain hopes that you are still the same pleasant young man they met a few months ago. They stand there in the doorway trying to make conversation with you when all you want to do is return to the soothing clicking of your Selectric. But you humor them with one of your latent witticisms, or you listen to the story of their day, which is almost always pathetic and often features deviant students who use multiple swear words.

These are pitiful, forlorn sympathy-seekers and knowing this, you put aside your novel for a while and walk down the hall just listening. You share coffee with them in the teachers lounge or downtown at the diner. Occasionally you saunter past their doorways and watch as they pack their purses and briefcases, gathering their things with tired sighs. Then, you return to your novel.

Some mornings, after you trek across the crusty football field to the school, you meet teachers in the teachers' lounge who are interested in how your "little project" is coming along. You tell them your novel is fine, that you are halfway, three-quarters, nearly finished now, and are looking forward to the second draft.

One of these teachers, Ms. Connolly, is in her mid-thirties and is striking with glossy auburn hair, gazelle brown eyes, and a mind. When you inform her that you are working on a novel, those gazelle eyes open indulgently.

"Really?" she says.

She says she wishes she could be a writer. You tell her it takes a lot of self-discipline and that not everyone can be one. You either are a writer or you aren't, you say. You are smug with the fact that your novel will soon be finished, and that despite the fact that you were once a cheap charlatan, you are now an honest-to-God real writer. You have to write if you're a writer, you tell her; and a writer cannot allow himself to get sidetracked, you add, especially a novelist.

You pass her, Ms. Connolly, in the halls from time to time, or you see her in the teachers' lounge on days when you substitute-teach. You consider pursuing something libidinous with her, but rethink the matter when you eye your manuscript, now a heaping 373 pages on the rickety typing table. From then on, your only contact with Ms. Connolly is in the halls.

"You look tired," she says, running the back of her hand across your cheek. "You spend too much time in that nasty room. Come upstairs and visit me sometime. We could go to lunch."

However, too clever, too dedicated to the task to be tricked, you charge ahead with your novel. Even on weekend trips to Boston you bring a legal pad and a fistful of sharp pencils. Every day you write. You write a self-imposed minimum of five pages on your novel, and often you have reserve energy at the end of the day to turn out a short story as you do right now. In the beginning, you drank a

Scotch or a beer after your daily output; but you soon quit all your former vices; drinking, smoking and women interested only in derailing you.

Yet you have your half-witted moments. Thinking you can become romantically involved with a woman and remain on track with your novel, you pursue a brief relationship with a graduate student in geology named Laura. She goes to a college named after a famous toothpaste. You tell her you are writing a novel and do not have time for games, and she tells you that she, too, wants something serious and that she loves you and adores you and is in awe of you because you are a novelist. This is good, you tell yourself.

But you do not know all the facts. She neglects to tell you that she is still involved with a boyfriend of two years, a business major named Jeff, whose primary ambition in life is to make a million dollars by his thirtieth birthday so he can establish a mock Medieval village in Vermont. You roll your eyes when she tells you this because you cannot even comprehend the idea that she would balk at having you, a driven yet romantic novelist. That she entertains the notion of keeping you as a "friend," like another cock pecking around outside the henhouse, revolts you. You tell her that she knows your number and can call you when she gets her act together. You, meanwhile, have a novel to write.

So on you write. You have days when you want to walk downtown, purchase a quart of charcoal lighter fluid, and set your manuscript aflame in the steel garbage can. Then there are the mornings when the school hums with the scraping of desks and chairs on tiled floors, the clanking of lockers, and the flurry of shuffling teenaged feet; and you tap into that vigor and put words on paper. You reach to your left and grab another sheet of the crisp white bond you swiped, roll it into the Selectric, and delight at the delicious "zzzt-zzzt" sound the crank makes as the paper rolls into position. You center the page number at the top, and continue.

But you cannot write every morning and afternoon as you would like; you have to earn your pocket money. About three days a week, you substitute-teach, mostly in English. You revel in instructing these tyros of literature, and you draw on some of your own experiences as a novelist to demonstrate to these kids with the constipated faces what novelists go through to create their masterpieces.

"You're writing a novel, aren't you?" asks a boy in the back with a wide head and thick glasses, looking up from a Ray Bradbury novel he is reading. He looks like a young Ray Bradbury, you tell yourself.

You reply quickly, but with emphasis, "Yes."

The girls ogle you and whisper to each other. The boys squint at you with bored suspicion. The word is now out among the students that you are a novelist.

And with this burden of fame come packs of five or six students to your writing chamber between classes. They knock the obligatory knock, then enter.

"Hello," say you, the working novelist.

"Hi," they say sheepishly.

They are fifteen year-old girls mostly, in puffy sweatshirts boasting the names of \$25,000-a-year colleges like Dartmouth and Harvard, which most of their parents cannot afford. They slip in the door past the cabinet and surround you, surveying your writing area. You are a novelist, as they see by the mounting stack of bond to your right, the two thesauri, and the dictionaries (also two). They caress your ice-pick sharp pencils and feel the points. They touch your wool sweater as if to be sure you are real. You are glad that your lowers are beneath the table, out of view of these wholesome schoolgirls with the angelic eyes. You do not want to tarnish their view of you as a novelist, someone above base carnal desires and a swollen member. So you shoo them from your room, while remaining in your plastic chair with your lowers well-hidden. The door

closes, the dust kicks up, and you type on, through the afternoon and into the late evening.

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One evening in late January you are so immersed in your novel that you do not notice the janitor when he comes into your room and empties the steel garbage can. He leaves, locking the door from the outside. When you get up to take a leak, you discover, to your horror, that the lock on the door is ancient and has trapped you inside. You curse the witless janitor for doing this, and for all the nights he has distracted you with his vacuum next door in the library. You are hungry. You are hungry and thirsty and you have to take a leak. You bang on the door, but there is no answer. You check your watch. It is 8:38 p.m. The janitor has left by now, and the school does not reopen for another eleven hours.

But you are a novelist, a marathoner, a man of endurance, and will not be torn asunder by this development. You take your leak into six of the twenty-six Coke cans piled next to the garbage can. The janitor does not take them, you say to yourself, because he knows you are a novelist, and novelists are by definition poor, and you need the five-cent deposits more than he. So you take your leak and cache the cans below the steel TV cart. Now, for nourishment. There are not many choices. In fact, there is only one; the Hawaiian Punch. The question is, after 11 years, will the punch be drinkable? You ransack the yearbook cabinet for a tool. You find a pair of scissors. Now you spy your faithful friend, the punch, on the table, huddled next to the warmth of the humming Selectric. You feel a brief pang of guilt as you raise the scissors over the steel container, but you are thirsty and you are a novelist; and on the evolutionary ladder, thirsty novelists are more important than cans of punch, even if said punch is an old Hawaiian buddy.

Closing your eyes, you plunge the scissors into the punch, and the sucking sound seems like your friend's last breath. Reluctantly, you pierce the other side of the can; and finally you plant your lips over one of the holes and suck

the sustenance from your companion of many months. You are sorry, you say to the can, now desiccated as you place it next to the typewriter again, but you had to do it because you are a survivor; you are a novelist.

And thus, you, the novelist, foil another crisis, another quandary designed by unseen forces to prevent you from completing your novel. That evening, reinvigorated from drinking the punch, you fire out another twenty-three pages. And in the morning, when the school begins to stir with the festering voices of tired teachers, your father opens your cell door and walks you down the hall with his arm over your shoulders to get you a cup of coffee.

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As the weeks pass, your college buddies invite you on weekend trips of snowmobiling and skiing, but you decline all invitations. Even Ms. Connolly remains persistent, leaving yellow sticky-notes on your writing room door inviting you to the movies or to dinner. But you do not answer her notes. Your novel is in its final pages now, and you fear that any distractions could sidetrack you. So you type on.

Very near the end, however, you hit a snag. You cannot write. The grimy, light blue walls of your room irritate you, so you go into the hall for a short walk. You can't decide what to do. You are so close to the end. You return to your closet, pull out a sheet of legal paper and begin making circles on it like you did that summer at the college with the other writers, but it does not work now. You look to your pal, the punch, for help; but since you sucked the life out of him and left him barren on the table, he and his siblings are not as generous with their advice or encouragement. It is time to leave. You slip on your coat, pack your manuscript, and step out into the world.

You walk downtown, across the Chestnut Ridge River bridge, to the railroad tracks. Sometimes you come down here to watch the water and think. Now you balance yourself on the rail while considering your novel. You feel that though you are only pages away from the end, you don't know your characters anymore. You

agonize over the plot and dialogue, the symbols seen and unseen in your novel. Your novel is pissing you off, so you kick at the air. You kick at the air, slip, and sprain your ankle.

You sit there for a moment with a sprained ankle considering how your novel might get you flattened by a freight train. Clawing at the dirt, you drag yourself off the tracks and pick up the penny you left on the rail for squashing. Safe on the gravel beside the tracks, you try to stand on your ankle, but it is too painful. You wince and fall down. Fortunately in the weeds you see a stout maple branch you can use for a crutch. It has a nice handle on the end and is just the right length. You reach out, grab it, and prop yourself up. It fits snugly in your armpit, like it was grown specifically for this purpose.

You want to walk home, but you know that, in your impaired condition, it is too far. Instead, you try to think of a place you can hobble to now. Then you remember Ms. Connolly's address from the sticky-notes: 14 Winslow Lane. You get moving.

Ms. Connolly lives on the ground floor of a two-family home. You limp toward the red house with the maple branch under your right armpit and your satchel over your left shoulder for balance. The satchel is heavy with your manuscript, which now totals 472 pages. You hop up the steps on your good leg and press the bell.

She answers the door with sympathy across her face, slips herself under your arm, and leads you into her living room. She eases you onto a green couch and props up your ankle with pillows and fetches a bag of ice. She puts your satchel on a wooden coffee table that is worn at the edges and picks up the paperbacks that lay on the floor in a jumbled heap below her reading chair. It is a pretty room in a shabby sense, and even the cheaply framed Monet and Renoir prints trying in vain to disguise the yellow, curling wallpaper do not sadden you now.

You are lying on her couch with your ankle propped up and your makeshift cane across

your belly like a battered veteran of the Confederacy just returned from Gettysburg.

"Are you comfy?" she asks, now sitting on the couch beside you, her hands on your arm and tummy, precariously close to your lowers.

"Fine, thank you," you say.

She brings you some tea, then she serves you some leftover lasagna she made for you last night but for which you didn't show up. You ask to use the phone. You don't really have to call anyone, but you feel like you should call someone, anyone. She tells you to rest, to relax, and she puts on some soft music, "Rhapsody in Blue" you think, and with the breeze wafting through the curtains into the dim room and her beside you, nothing else matters.

Except your novel. You heave your shoulders off the couch and say you have more work to do. But with your bad ankle, you are no match for her, and she easily presses you back on the cushions.

"Forget your novel tonight," she says, brushing the hair out of your eyes. "You're hurt, and look at you. You're a mess."

She is right. You are a mess. As a novelist, you have paid little attention to your personal hygiene and the condition of your previously spotless, stylish clothes. You look in the mirror across the room. She looks with you. Your face is dirty, you need a shave, your hair is too long and greasy, and you smell. Forget the novel for one night, you tell yourself.

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The next morning is Saturday, and she brings you a steaming plate of flapjacks and bacon. The bacon is crisp but not overdone, and she spreads just the right amount of butter and syrup on the flapjacks. You have not been treated so well since you began your novel, nor have you treated yourself well, eating Slim Jims and drinking cans of 11-year-old Hawaiian Punch. This is nice, you tell yourself. She smiles as she reads in the chair next to you.

She adjusts your pillows and helps you into the bathroom, where you shower while she washes your clothes. Then she gives you a fluffy white terrycloth robe to wear while the clothes dry. You start thinking of ways you can repay her when you get better, when you finish your novel.

Later in the afternoon, she drives you up to school. She pulls her little truck up to the curb in front of the school, shuts the engine off, and kisses you full on the mouth.

"Good luck," she says tenderly as you step out of the truck.

You look back, and see her smiling at you as she drives away. After a deep breath, you step inside.

Long bands of light stream down the hallway from the opposite end, and you walk into the light, leaning on your maple branch. There is an unsettling emptiness in the hall now; with no students or teachers here, the walls are lifeless metal and concrete. You plod past a locker, on which is scrawled in fresh magic marker, "DIE!" This is unnerving, as is the broken EXIT sign at the other end of the hall. You near the door to your room. You sigh.

Inside, all your old friends are there, but it is not the same. You feel them flout you for your careless philandering. You plop down the satchel and remove the thick manila folder that contains your manuscript. You feel its heft in your hand. You untie the string and place the pages carefully on top of the typing table. You slip a page into the Selectric and type the page number. You think. You stare. You stare at the paper all afternoon and into the night, but nothing comes.

Hobbling home before dawn, you tell yourself that even the best of writers have bad days. You look at the stars. They glow keen and bright in the cold February night. You have not noticed them lately. You think about how your friends have stopped calling you, and how only a freak accident made you go see Ms. Connolly; Heather, as she told you to call her from now on. You decide you need to reassess

your priorities. Maybe you can work on your novel and still find time to be sociable. You will still finish the novel. After all, you are a novelist, a marathoner, one who endures the thousand petty heartbreaks and trifles of life and finishes what he set out to do

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June 27, 2002

[Back to Oasis](#)