

Gabe's Story

After his order arrived, Gabe Watkins picked up his fork and started working on his eggs and hash browns. Never once looking at them, his other hand was taking notes. He was going over a short list of items that amounted to his writing process. One abstract line item held his interest; inspiration.

Inspiration is a funny thing. It's not something you can control. Certainly, you can encourage it to appear. More often than not, it can't be found. It's like a rare flower that blooms in the first several months of Spring then cannot be found until next year. Gabe tried many tricks such as locking himself in a room with only a desk, chair, paper, and pencil. He'd tried music, art, movies. Nothing fit a consistent pattern for him. He wished this process was more ironclad; he might be able to finish his newest manuscript.

His first novel had become a moderate success. It didn't make the New York Times Best Seller list, Oprah wasn't promoting it. No nothing that big, but the level of success was enough for Gabe. He was published and selling copies in bookstores. Most of the sales were from online stores. For him, that was what he called 'big.'

"More coffee?" The waitress appeared. He choked down a bit of egg, put down the fork and pushed the cup closer to her. "Yes, please." Ignoring his coffee, he went back to his list.

Inspiration

He remembered how the biggest flashes of inspiration just flew into him during his bus rides to work. Was it something about the bus, the drone of the engine, the swaying chassis? Ideas would pour into him just before the bus made it into town. Just outside of Little Bear, right before the gas station, there was an old two lane truss bridge. Locals called it Old Orange. Not much inspired as it was just old, and orange. It was most likely painted red at some point, who knows. Today it was just old and rusty. It was about the time the bus would approach the bridge is when he started getting his great ideas. That was when he broke through some of his toughest bouts of writer's block. He must have already known this as Gabe recalled taking his bicycle out to Old Orange and spending time on the banks of the river underneath. That was where he had some of his most successful writing sessions. There was something very inspiring about the view of the Atlantic Ocean and the shade of Old Orange keeping the Sun off of him while he wrote.

Frustrated with his current story, he took it out of his pack and crumpled the pages in his fist. He placed the wad of paper on his empty plate along with his napkin and silverware. He needed to go for a walk, clear his head, and walk off the breakfast. Little Bear was an interesting little town. It was a beautiful, quiet, ocean side community in North Carolina. There are many such towns with access to the ocean. This one appealed to Gabe for some reason. Maybe because it was so quiet. It was peaceful, and he called it home even though he lived just outside

of town in the unincorporated part of the county. A little jaunt downtown, window shopping, impulse purchases: that was the plan.

And that was just what he did. He enjoyed his favorite little shops downtown, sat at the park and went people-watching. That was a fun unofficial hobby of his. One could learn so much by being observant about people. *It's just so interesting how their stories can sometimes be so open for others to read.*

"Hello sir, can you throw it back to us?" A boy and his dog waited patiently. Gabe smiled. "Here you go." He picked up the ball and threw it for the dog. Well so much for being observant. He got off of the park bench and approached the art shop. Maybe he could catch some inspiration there. There were many people in the shop, more than usual. Just outside, there was an A-frame sign on the sidewalk, *Meet Local Artist Frank Olman and be sure to bid on some of his works.* There were many paintings and a few sketches on display. The sketches were charcoal on heavy paper. The rest on display were mainly oil paintings while a few were water colors.

Gabe stopped at one of the larger pieces, it was her. It was the *Sweet Marie!* There she was: the old ironclad. Everything was there: he could see the steam pouring out of the stacks and the sails were stowed away. The sea was violent and rolling. The storm in the sky was in a spiral pattern complimenting a similar spiral in the waves. The effect was a complete swirl with the subject at the center naturally pulling the eye to the middle. He could see the ship was painted at a steep angle with the aft lowered and the bow prominent and nearly skyward. Towards the bow was a lady in a peach-colored formal gown standing tall in the storm. She looked untroubled, solemn and confident, almost like she's done this a million times. Her hair was soaked and plastered to her face. Her hat blown away or smartly left below deck. The little brass tag below the painting read *"The Proud Lady" ~ Oil on Canvas.*

For a few moments, he felt like he couldn't breathe. Cold was creeping into his fingertips. The sensation crawled up his arms until he was shivering. He felt the wind cutting through his clothes. Fat drops of rain hit his face so hard it was as if they were drilling into the bone beneath the surface. The lady grinned. It was just enough to know she was smiling more than she had been. Gabe scanned the room and saw the crowd of patrons was thicker on the far end of the room. That must be where Mr. Olman was signing autographs and shaking hands. He had to see the man. Politely pushing his way through the crowd, Gabe caught a glimpse of the painter. Frank Olman was a small man with male pattern baldness. He kept a light ring of hair around the equator of his head. Frank peered at him over a pair of thin wire glasses.

"Frank Olman," he said. He extended his hand.

"Gabe." He reciprocated and shook the man's hand. "Your painting *The Proud Lady* is haunting."

Was that the word he wanted to use? Yes. It was damned appropriate.

"Haunting, you say?" Frank removed his glasses spinning them around in one hand. "Yes, I think you're right."

Not wanting to drag this out, he went right to the point. "Mr. Olman that ship, the *Sweet Marie*, I wrote about her in my story. How are you painting my ship?" Gabe wasn't mad at Frank, just astonished that it was so... accurate. How the hell did this man paint it so like the image in his head?

"Your ship?" Frank was smiling. He pulled out a copy of Gabe's book from his bag under the table. He laid it in front of Gabe for him to see. "It seems you wrote about my ship." Drumming the table with his fingers, he looked down at Gabe's book *What was Lost*. It was about a fisherman and blacksmith named Herbert who was lost at sea after an unfortunate accident aboard a hybrid steam/sail passenger ship, the *Sweet Marie*. "I think we need to compare notes."

* * *

"More coffee?" The lady was making rounds with the pot filling mugs.

"Yes please." He pushed the mug a little closer to her and looked out the window. Where was he? His meeting with Frank was a few days ago. This really felt like an urgent topic and Gabe wondered why they didn't meet immediately after the art gala. He didn't want to admit it, but he knew. They both did. That old boat belonged to neither of them. What did he think Frank was going to discuss, artistic rights, plagiarism?

The little bell on the front door rang. Gabe looked up and found Frank entering the place. He waved him over. "Please, have a seat. The lady will be by again soon if you want to order anything."

"I'll most likely just have coffee." He saw a little hesitation in Gabe. "It's OK, no need to feel uncomfortable. Please eat. Enjoy."

He did. Now he just felt stubborn. The painter was here and Gabe just felt like he didn't even want to talk to the man. But he kept thinking about the rain, the wind, and that lady's smirk. "Who's the lady?" Frank was caught a little off guard as he was staring out of the window, probably trying to figure out how to start the conversation. Advantage Gabe. "The Proud Lady".

"Her? I noticed that she's nowhere in your book. She's nobody. I think. It's just a painting. I made her all up just as..."

"That's bullshit." He stopped to look around a little sheepish and then much quieter "That's bullshit, man, and you know it." Another sip of coffee. "Who is she, and why do we both want to write or paint about that boat she's on?"

"OK, calm down. I told a half truth. I think I made her up. And as far as I know she really is nobody. I got such a strong flash of inspiration that I had to paint her right there. Right then and there. I could see it all, and I had to capture it." The lady came around again, just for Frank. "Coffee?"

"Yes please."

"Will you be eating or--?"

Frank interrupted, "No, just coffee thanks."

They were quiet for several minutes when Frank resumed. "It was so cold. It was like I could feel what she felt, see what she saw. Painting most of it right down by the ocean side really helped bring the painting to life. It might be my greatest work. I don't know if I could do it again."

"Where?"

"Excuse me?"

“Where on the ocean side?” Gabe had a feeling he knew the answer. It was as if the answer didn’t come to him on his own, but as if a stranger whispered it in his ear. “*Press him. He knows about Old Orange. So do you.*”

“Down by an old truss bridge outside of town.”

Gabe made a quick little palm slap on the table “I knew it.” His own reaction surprised him, but he was excited. There was something going on; a sort of mystery and he wanted to solve it.

They talked for some time about that bridge, inspiration, and their respective forms of art. After leaving the restaurant, Frank agreed to visit the bridge with Gabe. The next morning, they decided to take a bus out to the nearest stop and walk the rest of the way. Gabe told Frank about his suspicions about Old Orange. He would regularly cross the bridge by bus. It gave him a chance to just stare out the window and think. Other days, he could just write in his notebook while the bus driver worried about traffic.

He wasn’t a superstitious man, or believed in ghosts or anything like that but it was just a really strange and kind of cool feeling to know that inspiration would just hit him like a bolt whenever he was in that area. It was a damn near never-fail situation. Whenever he got writer’s block, he would just take a trip down to the bridge and BAM pages would nearly write themselves. It became so much a part of his writing process that he quit taking the bus so he could walk across the bridge. That gave him more time to get across and more time with the mysterious wave of great ideas. Then it evolved into making little one-man picnics under the truss bridge and just writing until he developed cramps in his hand.

Frank’s account was nearly identical except it was oil painting as opposed to writing. It was odd they never met before today. Why was that?

“Well for one, *The Proud Lady* predates your book by several years.” He looked sidelong at Gabe as they walked. “So you see, I couldn’t have painted your ship. But I don’t really believe much in coincidences either. How vivid are your flashes of insight and inspiration?”

“Very.”

“I know.”

And they both did. They walked without much conversation for the rest of the trip.

Standing on the rocks near the water’s edge, they both stared out at the horizon. It was a familiar and comfortable feeling for both of them, and they shared a sort of meditation. Frank felt the need to paint dock workers loading cargo onto a ship. Was it the same one? His mind’s eye tried to find any distinct feature to answer his own question, but he couldn’t tell. He could smell the sea, the sweat, and the ship. The workers spoke politely in the company of a passenger, and then the conversation deteriorated into lewd jokes and not so polite language.

Gabe was thinking about his book, and then about the subject of the book: Herbert. He was a fisherman and a trained blacksmith. Herbert was traveling to see the former colonies across the pond, start a new life. He packed whatever he could fit into two large trunks and boarded a passenger liner and trade ship out of

West Bay in Dorset. The *Sweet Marie* was one of the first several ironclads. She was a hybrid sailing and steamliner. Herbert's family went ahead of him by close to a month. He had some work to do selling the land and the remainder of their things. He could then bring that cash, the two trunks, and himself to reunite with his family so they could start again in the new world. Several hundred miles off of the coast, the engine room reported issues with the boilers. They were under stress as the ship was carrying too many passengers and the boilers were made to work harder and eventually there was over-pressure in the system causing the lower middle section to detonate. The ship sailed almost to America. It was incredibly sad for Herbert as land was so close. His family was less than several hours away from unloading, traveling over land, and this happened. As the explosion was below decks and mid-ship, it nearly cut the boat in half. Herbert never made it to the States. And his family never reunited.

Why would he write such a story? That was never Gabe's style. He supposed that was precisely why it sold. Nobody wanted to buy a story that he truly loved: a story that he thought was amazing and worth the read. This strange work of fiction was somehow produced by his own hand, and others enjoyed it. Only he didn't. He had an idea that this story never did come from him. This was so different than the way he would have told it, the way the characters interacted, and he certainly wouldn't have set it around a maritime story. He knew nothing of sailing or the sea.

Frank was lost in his thoughts. Gabe watched him. What was he thinking? Was it similar? Was it 'Why did I paint that ship? I know nothing of ships.' Smiling at that, Gabe bent down to get a few rocks. He started skipping some, lobbing others. Bounce, bounce, bounce, bounce, plop. Four. He could do better. Bending down to get more, he fell backwards on his butt. The proud lady was under the water, grinning at him. His entire upper body turned to ice as he stood up to get a better look. She was gone. Rubbing his arms to remove the goosebumps and get warmth and blood flowing, he grabbed Frank's arm.

"Eh?"

"Come on Frank, let's go. I don't think we'll learn much throwing rocks and staring at the sea." Frank's eyes narrowed as he looked Gabe over. He saw the fear; he could see the cold too, Gabe thought.

"You've seen her haven't you? Just now. You did didn't you?"

The cold feeling returned as he knew this really happened. Mass hysteria? Some sort of toxic sewer leak causing them to see things? But the same things and so vivid?

"Yes. I saw her."

"Mmm hmm." He could see Gabe needed a break from Old Orange "OK. I'll walk with you back towards town."

"Why is it that I saw the lady in your painting? Why would she be smiling at me and not bothering you?"

"Bothering? She doesn't bother anyone. Likes to smile. Pretty. Doesn't talk much." Gabe looked over at him as they walked. Frank continued "I've always had the feeling she really wants to tell me something. Instead she just backs up a step and then smiles. Must be too proud to burden others with her story. That's why I painted her on the ship. That's why I called her the Proud Lady."

“Why the ship?”

“She showed it to me. In a dream I think. We sailed together, and a violent storm arrived. It was on us before we knew it. The waves felt like they must’ve hit 25 foot tall or more. She just stood calm on the deck near the bow section. Proud as can be. Just enjoying the storm like it was an afternoon rain. I don’t think much else happened. The dream just ended. But that image was so strong that I had to transfer it to the canvas. And that would’ve sold for thousands, only I can’t let it go. “

“I’m giving up my latest story.”

“Now why would you do that?”

“I started telling another story that was much too similar. It was almost a parallel telling of the same story, but only from the perspective of one of the crew. I’m not writing it.” He rubbed his arms. The goosebumps were the tallest he’d seen his whole life and the icy feeling was all over. He was still scared of that last encounter. “Children’s books. That’s where I’m going next. No more exploding ships or your proud ladies.”

They said their goodbyes and went their separate ways.

Children’s book. Yeah he could do that. It would give him his creative outlet and keep him from morbid adult themes. No ships this time.

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Gabe was out early several days after his last meeting with Frank. Just like an addictive drug, he couldn’t resist the pull. He couldn’t say no to that tasty sweet rush of inspiration and the steady stream of ideas that he felt. Like a troll under the bridge begging for payment, that proud lady would surely be waiting. He decided to stay away from the shore line. This time, he remained on top of the bridge on the little foot path. The two lane traffic wouldn’t bother him and he wasn’t in the way. The little pedestrian railing wouldn’t stop a car, but he’d be safe enough. Why was he focused on accidents? Instead, Gabe focused on his new book, his children’s book. Little Henry. The name just came to him and he liked it. “OK. What does little Henry do?” He looked around as if someone might answer. He loves something? He lost something? He faces a challenge?

Little Henry’s socks and shoes were soaked through. Why was his feet wet? Little Henry liked to play in the stream. He played with his favorite wooden boat. Little Henry’s boat was hand-carved by his father ‘Big Henry’. It was a tug boat. Little Henry loved that tug boat, but now it was gone. Slipped out of his hands; poor Little Henry watched it float downstream.

Well there was only one thing he could do. Go after it! Little Henry passed Large Timothy. Large Timothy was a farmer who owned the land next door.

“Hello Little Henry,” said Large Timothy.

“Hello Large Timothy,” replied Little Henry.

“What are you doing today?”

“Chasing my boat! Want to come with?”

“Not today Little Henry, I’ve got to tend the corn.”

“OK Large Timothy. Have the best day ever!” Little Henry continued down the bank of the stream, after his little wooden tug boat.

Then Little Henry passed the local school. He saw Old Gus. Old Gus was the school's principal.

"Hello Old Gus," said Little Henry.

He put the pen down and stared at the sea. This was much too repetitive. Rubbing his temples he thought about children's books and their propensity for repetition. A small ship was far out near the horizon. It might be a commerce or a fishing vessel. He was no expert and wouldn't be able to tell the difference. It move slowly across the water and reminded him of an old koan. Koans were old Japanese riddles of a sort. You were supposed to answer them in your own way. This reminded him of the one about stopping the boat. It went something like this "From where you are, stop the distant boat from moving across the water." He was never very good at these things and jokingly stuck his hand out.

Concentrating really hard and twisting his hand into a sort of claw, he was going to stop that boat with his mind. Move the water. Move the boat. Move your mind. There was another that went "No waves, no wind, the empty boat is full of moonlight." He lowered his hand remembering he was on top of the bridge instead of under. People could see him. He must've looked pretty funny.

He resigned to just watching the boat slip across the horizon.

"Little Henry and his Tug Boat" That would make a decent title. It was short, to the point, and told the reader what to expect. His arms were sore as he leaned on the railing. Standing up to rub his forearms, he was distracted and lost that little boat on the horizon. "Little Henry lost his Tug Boat and Big Ol' Gabe lost his little boat on the horizon". He laughed a little at that.

"That's the story mum used to tell me." An excited little voice. "Did you meet Large Timothy or Ol Gus? What about Massive Mayor? He organized the townsfolk to help find my tug boat."

Gabe turned around to see Old Orange was missing the two lane road in favor of an old ship's top deck. There was many people on the deck working, talking, moving around while a small group stood near Gabe. A little, undernourished boy, pushed past the adult's legs and waists. "Hiya, I'm Henry." He beamed.

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It felt like he slept for a week. Still groggy, the morning light found its way past his closed eyelids. It took him a few minutes to rub some soreness out of his muscles. Then he just stared at the ceiling. Cocking his head to the side, he looked at it from a slightly different angle. Sitting straight up and looking around, it was a small and well-furnished room. The decoration was antique. The morning light came through a round window near the bed. He stood up on the bed and looked outside. Water. Nothing but water.

The hallway outside of the room was so narrow that he was able to support himself with a hand on each side. It was a comfort as his inner ear was off. Dizzy and lightheaded, he moved down the hall pausing to listen at a door or two. It was quiet except for the creaking of the ship as it rocked back and forth. At the end, the hall opened up to a small well-decorated room. A large, wide stairwell rose to deck level. Gabe saw a few crew members, but no passengers. Each time he approached one of the crew, they would slowly turn away busy with some task or other.

Up top on deck, he found the passengers. Possibly all of them. The deck was crowded with people. They were all dressed in vintage attire. The seas and sky were calm, the weather pleasant with the sun on his face. The little boy who introduced himself as Henry emerged from the crowd. "Hello Mr. Gabe, I wondered if I would see you today." Henry studied him, satisfied with the appraisal he fell into step with Gabe as he walked the deck. "Did you like my story? The one about my Tug? It was my mum's favorite. She liked to tell it to me when--"

Gabe interrupted him "Little Henry." It was difficult to tell if that was a question or statement. "Why am I on a ship?" This was an old-looking boat. What century was this thing from? He looked around saw masts with sails stowed away. Large stacks belched steam. The ship's construction was wood and iron. This was one of the old ironclad steam ships that dominated passenger travel and trade in the 1800's. He knew because he wrote about it. *The Sweet Marie!*

"Oh, I'm sure I saw you board with us. You know. Back in West Bay." He saw Gabe's puzzled expression. "In Dorset."
"England?"

"Yeah, oh there she is. Mum!" Henry ran off to meet an approaching lady. The Proud Lady. She lowered down and scooped up Little Henry in her arms and spun around. She gave a small grin to Gabe. Then she was gone.

He tried finding them for what felt like hours, then resigned to slapping himself in attempts to wake up. "Come on, wake. Do something. "

"Aww don't beat yerself up mate. It's not all that bad." Gabe looked up into that face. He knew that face. That lopsided grin, the well-groomed hair. "It'll be all right. I myself am going to see my family in America. Only two days from now." Herbert. *That's Herbert from my book, What Was Lost. He's the blacksmith and fisherman gone from Dorset to see his family in North Carolina.* The dizziness had returned three-fold. And out went the lights.

Again, he awoke in his cabin this time he had company. Herbert stayed with him. "Good to see ya again mate." Herbert patted his shoulder with a heavy hand. It was a good pat. It was comforting. Solid. "Several hours out." He surely meant the remainder of the trip. "Crew says there was an issue with the boiler when we neared Newfoundland. Says all should be well. Was runnin' under some strain. Come on, let's get you some breakfast."

The food had no taste. They ate in a dining room that was beautifully decorated in vintage wood and brass. The colors in the room were dull. It looked like he was viewing the room through a dull lens. The color of the wood, the brass, the food, Herbert, all were muted. The buzz of voices in the room was muffled. It was as if everything about the senses were a few inches off target. Herbert's cheery mood softened and it seems he was also a little off. But not in the same way as everything else. No. His mood dimmed like he was playing a part before and just broke character for a second. "Come on, you can come topside with me. I got something that might help."

Back up top and near the bow, they waited. The air smelled of ozone, but there was no storm. This was another beautiful day, though with the same muted senses attached to it. He didn't see them approach but the Proud Lady and Little Henry were both there. They stood on the bow watching the horizon. Herbert led Gabe up to meet them. They joined them at the safety railing. The four of them

staring at the horizon. Gabe every once in a while stealing side glances at the Proud Lady.

Herbert told Gabe “Most of the passengers stay below decks, either in their rooms or near the boilers. A few of us prefer the top deck on the bow. We” He paused looking at the Proud Lady, Little Henry, and finally at Gabe. “We fly farther. We make it closest to the land.”

Very confused at what this meant, Gabe could only nod. He imitated the others and watched the approaching land. He felt a heaviness in their collective mood. The others were sad with their heads down. They appeared to be watching the approaching land, but in fact were staring at the grain of wood in the railing, or Little Henry’s shoes, anything but the shore. Anyone taking this trip would be thrilled to witness this event. It was almost like they sailed by this spot every day and were simply bored of it all.

“You can tell your story if you like.” She said without looking at him. She pointed off at an angle. He saw it. Old Orange was off in the distance. There it was. “It helps. It won’t be long. It helps to have a story ready. Tell something from your life. People seem to like those the best.” Herbert nodded at that and continued scanning the land ahead. They all did. The waves crested and broke with white foam. He could hear sounds of the coast. Gulls sang.

Then his companions lowered their heads, no longer looking out at the sights. They just stared at their feet like they were just waiting or praying.

“Here it is.” Herbert said. “Tell your story,” he said.

A great heat warmed his back for a fraction of a second. Then it became a heat he would never forget. Every nerve in his body was on fire. It was white lightning and intense heat on every part of his body. Everything spun. Land, sea, and sky kept changing places. Bright blooms of fire filled his vision blocking out all else. Screams. Violent blows from thrown objects and bits of ship pummeled him. He felt like a rag doll falling down an endless flight of stairs. He was airborne for an unbelievable amount of time. He could catch glimpses of land, air, water, ship, on repeat as he spun in the air. The ship was cut in two with a fireball separating the two sections. Snapshots of the ship’s demise flashed as he turned in the sky. He could see passengers in the air flying just like him. Many were in the water with burning sections of wood and iron. A hard impact. Water. Large sections of iron entered the water near him.

Then beautiful calm. It was cool. It was quiet. Under the sea, the water cooled him. Loved him. Held him until he was ready to leave. He was near shore as he looked up from the sea floor, he could see the surface somewhere around twenty feet above. He swam toward shore taking occasional glimpses at the surface. There wasn’t an urgent need to swim up for air. He was comfortable as the sea cooled him and loved him. He looked up to the surface of the water to find Old Orange waiting for him. And a young struggling writer hoping to find a little inspiration. Gabe waded out of the water, sat down next to the young writer and told his story.