

**JONATHAN
BALL**

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OF POSSIBLE
STORMS**

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HE ALWAYS WRITES. Aleya places the tea beside his book. She steals a glance (*The Robber* by Robert Walser), careful not to spill because the table shakes (*unstable-table*, she singsongs in thought). The tables all shake because of the warped hardwood floor, but his shakes the worst. Its shaking increases as his pen, held tight enough to whiten his knuckles, jitters across the yellow pad.

His writing is a messy hybrid of cursive and printing. Some words are only half-written, their other halves straight lines, a shorthand of his own design. She can never make anything out.

He doesn't notice her putting down his tea. He never notices her. Aleya doesn't mind, because he always tips her well. In fact, she wishes more of her men would ignore her in this way. So many hit on her or otherwise waste her time with their lonely desperation, the small talk she pretends to find pleasant (though sometimes she doesn't pretend). The women are no better. They display a wider range of attentions, are less predictable in their jealousies, irritations, lusts. The worst customers, of course, whether women or men, are the other writers. Except for him, the writers who

come into her tea house take even a glance in their direction as an excuse to escape from their work.

Unlike her other regulars, whose eyes she feels, whose words (however kind) seem too solid, her writer gives Aleya the impression that she means nothing to him. That he'd be just as happy with any other waitress, anybody else as silent and efficient as she. Even the regulars she does like she doesn't like as much as this writer, the one who demands nothing, who seeks only tea and silence. Although this tea house is as chatty as any, Aleya prides herself on keeping the music off during her shifts. During slow periods, the sole noises are the creaking of wood shifting beneath bodies, fingers clicking keys, pens scratching yellow pads.

Her writer scratches his yellow pad, and she wonders, not for the first time, what his name is, whether she might have read anything he's written. He never speaks except to order and he never speaks to anyone else, so she's never caught his name. He never meets anyone here and never runs into anyone he knows. She supposes that is why he comes here, to avoid everyone, to be out in the world and yet practising withdrawal. If he stayed home, he would have to stop writing to make his own tea and wouldn't gain whatever satisfaction he gains from ignoring the world that flows around him.

She fingers her necklace, a thin silver disc she's hammered herself. She watches him write for a moment, watches him ignore her, then slips away.

When she later turns back to him, having served a few more tables, she sees he's slipped away. He always pays when he orders, and often leaves without saying a word, so that in itself does not surprise her. But when she moves to clear his table (another sizable tip, twice the bill), she sees

the tea is still warm. Untouched. And a book lies on the table, but not the same book.

She picks it up, peruses the title. *The Lightning of Possible Storms*. She turns it over. There he is, her nameless writer, in the author photo, now named. *Jonathan Ball*. She frowns. Was this part of her tip? She'd been so happy, thinking him oblivious. But he'd left her his book.

She tucks it under one arm and takes it behind the counter, then throws it into a drawer below the till, out of sight. She continues her day, annoyed, lips tight. Her smiles forced and her tips small.

When she closes the tea house, she takes the book out of the drawer again. She supposes she has to read it. He will expect this. Maybe she can have Natalie return it, pretend she'd been the one to clear the table. But, of course, he'd see through that. Aleya always served him, and he always left a large tip. For *her*.

She flips the book open, curious. At least she'll see what he's always writing. Then she spies the dedication.

For Aleya, who will learn why.

Oh no, she thinks. Oh no.

She closes the book. She closes her eyes. Maybe this is just a dream. She wishes it a dream, wishes the book away. But even with her eyes closed, feels its dark weight in her hand.



SHE IS GLAD that it is summer, that the walk home is in light. She doesn't fear him, doesn't fear obsession, but she always feels unnerved walking home in winter's dark, and does not want to compound today's unease.

She wonders at the dedication. He's never shown her any attention other than this. Has never spoken to her except to

order, always the same words, his private ritual: "Just bring some tea, whatever's good."

Their private ritual, she supposes. After a time, she just started to bring the tea on her first trip to the table, and so he stopped ordering, stopped saying even that much to her. She always brought him something new, judging from the tip what he had liked. He had a taste for sweet teas and for chai. So yes, she supposes they share an intimacy of sorts, however strange. But to waste a dedication on her? He must be so alone.

At home she eats a salad, brews some coffee. Aleya always reads with coffee—tea all day while she works, coffee all night while she reads. Reads. Yes, she'll read the book, read it tonight. She might as well get it over with. The world has changed, and there is no use ignoring the change.

She keeps the house silent. Never much for music or company. When she opened the tea house, her dream had been modest: a business that wouldn't fail, propped up by its location in Calgary's Kensington area. She'd inherited the location from her parents, who'd kept a bookstore. When they died, she closed the failing store, boxed all the books into the basement of the family home she'd also inherited. Took out a second mortgage in order to convert the store into a tea house, with a few baked goods and specialty coffees, some paraphernalia. The irony of all those writers, drafting books in a former bookstore, whose closure served as a comment on their efforts, never escapes her even if it escapes them.

Now another book on top of the boxes in the basement. Always an insomniac, she has been reading a short book every night since she boxed up the store, spreading longer books over a few days or weeks. In this way, she plans to read through the entire bookstore, the sad legacy her parents left.

Her too-young parents, both dead from a gas leak. Dead in this house. While she was away, studying in Winnipeg. In her madness, at the time, she thought she wanted an MBA. She gives the books away once she reads them, never understood why you would read the same book twice. In the three years since she opened the shop, even at this steady pace, she's read through only 713 of the ten thousand books in the basement. Buying not one book in all that time. Another way the gift of the book has disrupted her happy routine.

The coffee's sharpness pleases her and she feels more positive as she settles into her reading chair, a Cleopatra lounger. Worst case, her writer has developed a little crush and she'll have to deflect it, maybe lose a customer and some tips. And the book might not be meant as a love letter—she *has* helped him write it, in a (quite abstract) sense, so perhaps he's just acknowledged something that doesn't require acknowledgement, has overdone things and doesn't mean it the way she is taking it. It would have made more sense to acknowledge her on, say, an *acknowledgements* page (flipping through, she doesn't see one) rather than a dedication, but she supposes this is more poetic, more writerly. Writerlier?

For Aleya, who will learn why.

Who will learn why.

The phrase unnerves her more than the dedication itself. If the *why* isn't because she serves him so well whenever he comes into the tea house to write, then why?

If it *is* a love letter, this book, how she deals with it will depend on its extent. If the book is too warm, she will be cold, will send Natalie to serve him the next time he comes in. He'll get the message.

So Aleya opens the book and begins to read, wondering why.

NATIONAL BESTSELLER

IT'S ABOUT TIME I made some fucking money. That's what Jonathan was thinking when he decided to write a national bestseller. If he was thinking straight, he would have decided to write an international bestseller. But he was Canadian and Canadians dream small.

It's about time I made some fucking money, Jonathan repeated to his agent.

She agreed. And how, Meerkat asked, do you intend to do that?

I'm going to write a National Bestseller. (Already there were capital letters.)

Good luck.

I'm serious. His spastic fingers, the hands that always shook (a genetic defect, benign sporadic tremor) popped open his briefcase and rummaged out a copy of the latest *Quill & Quire*. He flipped to the bestseller lists. His fingers tremored in their sporadic way (yet so benign!) and he almost dropped the paper.

When did you get a briefcase?

It's all part of the package. (There was a package now.) Every time I see these bestseller lists, I notice my name's not

there. And look at these books. Garbage. I tried to read through one of these lists last month. Gah. It's not that they're unimaginative, formulaic. They're not readable.

That's your opinion. And we know how valuable your opinion is on the free market. Besides, people don't need to read them, just buy them.

Exactly. It has very little to do with the actual writing. Everything depends on other factors: the marketing budget, the plot hook, some failed novelist-turned-reviewer. Who's hip, who's young, who spent a year in Afghanistan, who looks good in a muscle shirt. Who's sleeping with Margaret Atwood.

You sound paranoid. Like a bitter amateur. So what's your plan? Seduce Peggy?

She grinned over her drink. She thought it was oh-so-funny. Jonathan didn't laugh. Lisa Meerkat was the worst agent ever. She even had a stupid name. Sometimes he thought he'd be better off without an agent. He'd be better off without Meerkat and in Toronto, centre of publishing, centre of the universe.

He didn't know how Meerkat managed to make all those sales. All those big sales for other people, but did she ever make a big sale for him? No. But Caleb, she got Caleb all the money in the world. She wouldn't confirm it, but Jonathan heard she got Caleb six figures for his first novel. The novel Jonathan edited.

Oh, before I forget—stay away from Caleb Zimmerman. What?

You know what I mean. Quit pestering him.

What pestering? I've been helping him with his novel.

Quit helping.

He's my friend. You've got to help out your friends. He's new to this whole publishing racket.

He's my client now.

On my recommendation.
I'll watch his back, don't worry.
I'm your client too.
And I love you just as much as I love Caleb. Only different.
You sound like my mom.



HALFWAY THROUGH THE MEETING, he decided to take a loss. He wouldn't even tell her about his plan. Dropped the topic after she began talking about Caleb. He thought she would be excited about his plan, but she only wanted to talk about Caleb.

To be fair, she didn't say anything else about Caleb. But his ego had taken the blow. He wondered if she remembered how his first novel sung to her from the slush pile. One sentence and she fell in love, faxed him a contract, and had him signed to her agency before she got to the fiftieth page. He wondered if she remembered.

Do I remember? Of course, I remember. How could I forget? On page fifty, the main character died and never returned.

It's never been done before.

Yeah, well. It'll never be done again.

The book (*Forever Ends a Day*) wasn't well-reviewed, but so what? It had its following. After it came out, he'd stumbled across a Facebook site where people could "become a fan" of Jonathan Ball. There were ninety-nine fans. He became number one hundred.

Now, your second novel, that's when you really proved you had the goods. Jonathan's second novel was about a gun nut who decided to live in the BC rainforests, Walden-like, and ended up trying to teach animals the ways of civilization. (One reviewer called it "the Canadian answer to Penguin

Island," which he had to look up, but on the basis of the Wikipedia summary he agreed.) The culmination of the gun nut's project was his attempt to construct an effective militia from the local bear population.

The novel had been hailed as a comic masterpiece, and he was nominated for a lot of awards. He sweated, terrified, through every ceremony, trying to decide which would be worse: winning or losing. He lost. And in the moment, he was almost happy. Almost. The novel wasn't supposed to be funny.

For his third book, *The Negative Blooms*, he collected his short stories. The National Bestseller would be his fourth. Even all those award nominations hadn't made *The Right to Arm Bears* a National Bestseller. He didn't know what you had to do to get a National Bestseller around here, but he would find out.



EVERYONE AGREED THAT Jonathan was a great writer. They just didn't want to read anything he wrote.

You're such a great writer! Jana sighed. I wish I could write as well as you. But no, I haven't finished your book yet. I heard it was nominated for an award, though! That must be great.

It didn't win.

Oh.

He never won. Well, that wasn't true. There was the time he got that free hot dog, in Grade 4. He guessed forty-two and he was right.

You're so smart. I just didn't understand the book.

What didn't you understand?

Oh, you know. Jana gave a vague wave, like she was swatting a fly in slow-motion. She breathed in, long and

loud, like it just took all her strength to kill that imaginary fly, the simile-fly. It's just too deep for me. When she breathed in like that, long and loud, a reverse sigh, her perfect breasts strained up and away, up and away, up toward him then away, away, away. I started reading the new Dan Brown instead. But it's good, your book, I mean, the writing is so fantastic, and it's all just so smart.

He would never sleep with Jana.

Maybe you should use quotation marks, said Caleb. People like quotation marks.

"Fuck you."

"See?"

Caleb was just trying to help. It wasn't his fault that everyone loved him like they loved Jesus. He had 3,764 fans on Facebook already with his first novel not even published yet. Caleb had a website at www.calebzimmerman.com where people could look at the cover of the not-yet-published book and masturbate if they wanted, or read the first chapter, which 3,764 people had done. Jonathan was thinking he might get a blog one of these days.



UNDAUNTED BY COMMON sense (what writer wasn't?), he drank five cups of coffee and his fingers skipped over his keyboard. This was going to be easy! In two hours, he had almost ten pages. If he kept up this pace he could have a full novel, three hundred solid pages, in two and a half days. Why not stay up all night! Before the weekend was out, before he had to return to his job teaching literature to students who didn't like books, he would be a bestselling-novelist-in-embryo.

He pressed on to page twelve before skipping back, to check a plot point, see what he had written. It was just a bunch of

gibberish. The plot made no sense at all, just meandered into endless corners.

Would anybody put up with this nonsense? They seemed to like Thomas Pynchon. But Pynchon had method, was rigorous even, below his madcap surfaces. He wondered how many books Thomas Pynchon sold. Enough to live a reclusive life of writing. But who knew, maybe Pynchon was a schoolteacher somewhere. Maybe he held the patent to some bizarre invention. He couldn't remember seeing Pynchon on the bestseller lists.

He shuffled his feet through the pile of empty coffee cups. Maybe he was drinking too much coffee? Or too little? There was something to be said for writing so much, good or bad. He could always transform some of it, maybe most of it, into useable material in the second draft. Was this why so many novelists had (or used to have, before it stopped being sexy) coke habits? Stephen King wrote a lot of bestsellers with a coke habit. But wrote even more without one, Jonathan supposed.

Anyway, he could barely afford all this coffee, never mind cocaine. How did authors afford coke habits? And he maintained a childish aversion to drugs, which would turn you into a gun-toting madman without fail. But cocaine aside, maybe there was something to this line of thought. Maybe there was something common to bestselling, or at least successful, writers—something they shared.

He skimmed some biographies online, and as far as he could tell the single thing successful writers had in common was that they didn't die, and didn't quit writing. With few exceptions, they were folks who worked hard for a long time and succeeded by virtue of the sole fact that they stuck around until they were no longer ignored.

Was there anything to learn from this? He hoped not. Otherwise his whole “plan” was a waste of time. He couldn’t let himself be distracted by the biographies of authors who lived in different times anyway. The circumstances of their lives did not apply to this new market scenario.

Back to the original scheme, of harvesting the bestseller lists for ideas he could combine in fire-hot fiction.

He pored through list after list, from back issues of the *New York Times*, *Publishers Weekly*, and *Quill & Quire*—he’d first subscribed to the latter two for the book reviews but later renewed them for the industry news. Who sold what where. As if any of it might make any difference in his life.

After rereading his notes on two years of bestseller lists, he’d compiled a list of his own:

THINGS PEOPLE SEEM TO LIKE INSIDE OF BOOKS

- *vampires*
- *mysteries*
- *coded messages about treasure or mysteries*
- *eating healthy (reading about it, anyway)*
- *exercising (ditto)*
- *sex (creepy, unsexy sex)*
- *cute kids*
- *the power of positive thinking*
- *wizards*
- *cute kids who are wizards*
- *animals, cute*
- *quantum mechanics (new age nonsense about)*
- *Jesus*
- *coded messages about Jesus*
- *how Jesus invented quantum mechanics*

It was a demoralizing exercise. What did he care about vampires? What did he know about positive thinking? He wasn't a code-breaker or quantum physicist. He didn't understand why anyone would allow a pet inside the house.

Desperate times called, so he sat still and thought of kindness for five whole minutes, but Jesus refused to shine light into his life.

What he was going to do with this list he did not know.

He retreated to steady ground. And redrafted those twelve pages of plotless gibberish into pseudo-autobiographical gibberish. Something playful and truthful in the story now, at least. He'd show it to Meerkat. Not much, but a start, in some direction. He wondered what Meerkat would say.