

A Subversive Character

The writer sits at a corner table in his favourite café, equipped with a pad of paper, a pen and his spectacles - the three essential tools of his profession. He carefully tears the ends from two paper sachets and pours brown sugar onto the foam that tops his cappuccino. The coffee is really the fourth requisite for his work and now he unwraps the fifth – a fruit and nut cookie. What he sees around him could be considered ingredient number six – the people. To a man of his imagination the variety in this café could surely provide material for many tales. But that brings us to the seventh necessity – inspiration. That is the one which is absent today.

Lacking new ideas, he pulls from his bag the pages of what he calls his ‘novella’. He busies himself editing and revising, trying to inject life to the story and depth to his characters. He has worked on this for so long that he is now quite unable to judge its worth.

There comes to his mind a character - the municipal clerk in *The Plague* by Albert Camus. This man dreams of acclaim as a writer, but the pages of his notebook are filled only with versions of his opening sentence. This he continually refines in the belief that once he has it right the rest will flow. He reads the current version to a friend:

“One fine morning in the month of May an elegant young horsewoman might have been seen riding a handsome sorrel mare along the flowery avenues of the Bois de Boulogne.”

He strives to render perfectly the picture he has in mind, to give his words the rhythm of the trotting horse. He alters a word here and a word there, but each change makes the sentence worse. The clerk - Joseph Grand is his name – aspires to be the supreme artist. The publishers, he says, will surely recognise his genius from the first sentence alone.

Our writer surveys the customers of the café. Notwithstanding a temporary loss of inspiration, he likens himself to God. He has the power of creation; on his pad he can command anything he wants to happen. He could, for instance, write himself into the arms of that nice-looking woman who has glanced his way a couple of times. Oh my God, he suddenly realises - she’s coming over!

“I don’t want to interrupt. I can see you’re a writer and I do so admire people who can write.” She looks at his notebook. “So many words! I won’t ask to read them; I know a first draft must be sacred to its creator.”

“Will you join me?” the writer asks. “Do you by any chance write yourself?”

“No, I don’t have your imagination. I’m a great reader though. I pride myself on my library. You might like to see it some time.” She looks towards the window. “I live just over there – the windows with the balcony.” After a pause she adds, “Perhaps you could write my flat into one of your stories.”

The writer, the omnipotent creator, replies, “I could make all sorts of things happen there.”

“And I would be completely at the mercy of your pen.” She smiles and casts her eyes down.

Enough of this! I’ve been sitting here waiting for inspiration and I’ve let my fictional writer carry me off on a frivolous daydream. And yet, and yet... I’m beginning to picture the flat with the balcony. Yes, the writer does pay her a visit. He admires the shelves of books. He selects a pair of leather-bound volumes and sits in a chair to examine them. His eyes stray to the glimpse of her breasts that is offered when she leans over to see what he has chosen.

“I thought you would like them,” she says.

There I go again. Enough! This salacious character will have to go.

A fresh page. Pen in hand. A sip of coffee and a bite of the cookie. Spectacles lowered to permit inspection of the café’s customers. And yes, over there, sitting alone, is the character whose story I will tell. The inspiration is here – the seventh pillar of my temple.

“The slim grey-haired man in the long overcoat stoops a little as he stands beside the grave.”

Perhaps ‘the overgrown grave’ would read better.....improve the rhythm....