

The Title Comes Later

At some point, or so it seems, every writer thinks it's a good idea to write about an author with writer's block. As though writing about someone, who is clearly having the same issue that they are having will somehow serve as a springboard into something wildly new and creative. Neal had come to that point, and perhaps I have as well, it's all so very meta after all.

Neal Burgess was a relatively successful science fiction author. He had been invited to comic-cons and bookstores to sign and sell books, as opposed to asking to come. The online reviews of his books were all good. He had enjoyed several positive interviews on various local news stations throughout his home state, including one with the very attractive Roberta Stockman. He always imagined a scenario in which agents were telling her to change her name. Roberta sounds like a grandmother's name, to which she replied, "That's exactly why it's going to set me apart from every anchor-woman wannabe out there." Her exact reply was subject to change depending on the fantasy. He imagined various other scenarios in which she played key roles. A common fantasy was the unlikely situation where he managed to defend her against an assortment of hoodlums, unlikely both because why would they ever both be passing by that particular imagined alleyway and because he didn't know how to fight.

His greatest achievement was still his first novel, which was due for a second printing, which meant a few more local television appearances. He was expecting, hoping for, a call from Roberta's station, though it had not come yet. In anticipation of the second printing he was hoping to publish a sci-fi short story in a science fiction magazine. Both his agent and he thought it was a good idea to use whatever means they could to drum up interest in the second edition, which included a few edits and the inclusion of several different sections that had been cut, against his better judgement, from the original printing. All in all, the story was greatly improved with the new edits. He was very proud of it. The new cover art was a spectacular improvement as well. This second edition was the story he had always intended to publish, but a fledgling author has very little say in what is printed. It was paramount then, that he get the word out in every venue, and by whatever means he could. A new short story certainly couldn't hurt, and so he sat down to write something with only a vague feeling for guidance. A feeling that it should incorporate elements of horror, that the hero should be a writer like himself, and that there might be a place for a heroine with features resembling a certain newswoman. Beyond this, he had no idea what he was going to write.

Neal's word processor of choice was on a computer attached to the internet. No one could have invented a greater distraction from productivity than the internet. Obviously, it is one of the greatest achievements of modern man, creating hitherto undreamed of opportunities for the furtherance of knowledge, commerce, and connecting with others, improving our respective lives in ways we aren't even aware of unless we have to go without it for a family reunion in Remotistan rural America. That being said, it can also be a colossal time-waster. Particularly when trying to write something you have no clear vision for, when there is only an internal voice reminding you of the necessity to "write," without offering any guidance as to what to write. It should be clear that I'm driving at the fact that Neal spent nearly an hour watching funny, to him, videos before he started any serious attempt to write. Even when he did start writing he thought of several household items he needed, and so took a short break to do some online shopping.

Finally, when he had exhausted his excuses, he turned back to writing. He stared at a mostly blank document. Blank except for the centered line "Title Goes Here," followed by a

double-space and a few sentences reading: *“Paper's stock value had risen dramatically in the last few years, given the ubiquitous power-outages. Who would've thought that in the mid 22nd Century investing in paper could make you a small fortune.”* It wasn't a bad start, but it also didn't lead anywhere.

Writing seemed to flow so much easier when he did it with paper and ink, or rather with a ball-point pen, which is technically ink, though paper and ball-point pen doesn't have as nice a ring to it. Paper always seemed inviting to him. The empty page on a computer screen was lifeless. Also, it somehow felt like it was mocking him. He was never sure why he felt that way, but a blank sheet in a word processor seemed to present an unspoken challenge, and not the good kind of challenge; the kind of challenge presented with an air of scorn.

What would people be using paper in the 22nd century for? Why would it become viable hundreds of years after everyone was making a concerted effort to go paperless? You could go off the grid with paper, somewhat anyway. What is paper used for now that could disappear for a time and become useful again in the future? Business memo's, letters, money, books? There would be no new books printed on paper in the future. Everything would be ebooks in the 22nd century; ebooks were already crowding out traditional books, or so he assumed, he had no actual market data to back up that assumption. Still, books, in an age where they were particularly uncommon would be something of a novelty. Everyone loves re-invention. An idea began to form in the ether. With the necessity of re-introducing paper due to unreliable power, and therefore unreliable data backups, paper would once again become a driving economic force. Physical file cabinets would be re-introduced. Paper money would come back in to vogue, due to inconsistent access to bank accounts through electronic means. Checks, horror of horrors, would once again become necessary for large transfer of funds. Newspapers would begin to circulate again. Amidst the resurgence of paper, there would be a mad dash to publish the first book on actual, physical paper, since the last one, over a hundred years ago. The lead character would be one such author, desperately trying to pen that first book. Neal decided to name the lead Isaiah. Biblical names never fall completely out of style. They've already lasted a few thousand years, what's another century? In the Bible, Isaiah was a prophet, a major one, according to the index of most Bibles. Neal could work in Biblical themes related to prophecy if he so chose, at this point he didn't know why he would, but who knows where the story would end up. Isaiah could be visited by the Spirit and pen a new book of the Bible, the very last revelation before doomsday, the last prophecy. There were two good titles in that idea, The Last Revelation, or The Last Prophecy. He replaced the text “Title Goes here” with both contenders. He'd decide which one he preferred when he was finished. A doomsday prophecy would tie in well with that vague feeling that it was meant to be a horror story.

He'd start with Isaiah nervously pacing the room. Writing, with a pen, had fallen so far out of fashion that Isaiah wasn't even capable of doing it. Writing with ink was every bit as dead as Latin. Everything was spoken into auto-correcting, interactive, word processors. Typing was retro, and typewriters were exorbitantly expensive and difficult to come by. Pen and paper weren't cheap either, but Isaiah's publisher had fronted the money, which was another reason for Isaiah to be nervous, if he messed up his writing he could cost his publisher a lot of money. Neal had no idea how much, so he would keep it as vague as possible.

Keyboards for computers were pretty rare as well. They had long since moved away from the QWERTY format due to some other country that didn't use QWERTY becoming an

economic powerhouse. Neal would have to do additional research on that, but he thought it would be an interesting little detail to add to the story to give it more realism.

Beyond the pressure of trying to write a story on such a strict timetable, which is a surefire recipe for writer's block, and beyond the expense of the pen and paper, Isaiah wasn't even physically capable of writing, as has already been noted. He had no idea how to even hold a pen. Calligraphy, which in the future just meant writing in general, was something people paid money to have lessons in. People would buy a nice bottle of wine and go learn how to write, in much the same way that people pay to go drink wine and paint or make pottery. Neal decided to change this. If classes like that existed, Isaiah would have already taken one obviously, and his publisher would have paid for it. That being said he would obviously still not be very good at it. He'd probably get muscle cramps in his hands from writing too. That had happened to Neal once when he was taking a final, and he had much more experience with writing than Isaiah did.

Neal could write in a few flashbacks of Isaiah taking the class, juxtaposing the jocularity of everyone else who were just there for shits and giggles with Isaiah who was desperately trying to learn a skill that could make him rich. Isaiah could get the name of the teacher and go bug him, or rather her, it would be a her, and she would of course be beautiful, though Isaiah wouldn't notice this at first because he'd be too focused on learning how to write. He could enlist her help, she could actually be the one who physically wrote it while he dictated it. He could cheat her on the book royalties, maybe. Or it could be more romantic. He liked the romantic idea better. Would it really be necessary to write the book on paper though? He could still just dictate the book to a word processor and they could print it on paper. Writing it on paper would be unnecessary. He could just save regularly to avoid losing data in the random blackouts. Still, Neal did like the idea of Isaiah having to physically write it, but it might require some additional suspension of disbelief on the part of the reader. Unless, it wasn't just inconsistent power that was causing all the issues, which incidentally could be explained through corporations and government fighting over environmental regulations in energy production, but that's such a current issue that it would add a political tinge to the story which he wanted to avoid, but he was losing his train of thought. Maybe it wasn't just inconsistent power, or the power being siphoned off to wealthier areas while poorer districts had none, since the wealthy could essentially bribe politicians to gerrymander energy production. Maybe it wasn't faulty energy, maybe there was none. There was no energy, because no one had developed a viable alternative to oil and natural gas, and those had been used up entirely. That seemed pretty unlikely though. Engineers, if engineers were the ones who developed those things... Scientists, and probably Engineers, would have come up with some sort of solution to energy production. People would push law-makers to nuclear energy before they went without the internet, let alone their cellphones. An overtaxed energy system, that left people without energy for weeks was a more interesting idea, to Neal anyway, than a world without energy altogether, that was just run of the mill dystopian. Neal never really thought things would actually get that bad. He was a cynic and thought things would inevitably get worse, but he never genuinely thought that mankind would once again find itself in a stone age. It seemed reasonable that Isaiah would write with a pen. It wasn't so much the possibility of losing data as much as lost time working on the book itself. Lack of consistent power would cut down on economic productivity across the board. Generators would go gangbusters, but gasoline would be hard to come by. Candles would once again be used as a utilitarian source for light, as opposed to purveyors of scents and romantic lighting. Refrigerated goods would go to waste. Canned and dry goods would be everyone's main source of food. Tap water would become unreliable since it wouldn't be properly filtered due to lack of energy. If

readers accepted these things, they could accept that Isaiah would write a story with a pen. And maybe hackers. Hackers hired by competing publishers wanting to put it out that first paper book in x amount of years and all that. Among everything else Isaiah would need to keep the story off the grid.

Neal decided Isaiah's writing teacher needed a name as well. He decided on Johanna. Not Joanna, but Johanna, where you pronounce the "H." He imagined her as a blonde woman with eyes that changed colors. She had splurged on some special contacts that faded from one color into another, like a mood light. Isaiah would have no idea what her actual eye color was. By the end of the story they'd fall in love and sleep together of course, and in the midst of all that he'd discover that her eyes were green.

What would Isaiah's book be about? That's what made the whole revelation idea appealing, Neal thought it would be easier to write pronouncement of doom rather than writing pieces of a story within a story. In addition, it would put Isaiah at odds with his publisher, and his agent, who he decided on the spot was an old man with a bio-mechanical heart, and this tension would add drama to the story. It would make the dynamic between Isaiah and Johanna more interesting as well. She'd obviously think he was crazy at first. (At this point Neal had decided that Isaiah would have a few false starts and then hire Johanna to write for him.) But then, maybe she would come to believe what Isaiah was dictating. Isaiah's prophecy would be one of doom, which the publishers at first wouldn't like, but then they would see that given the unrest all around them it could actually tap into a market that would rather see their anger affirmed than indulge in optimistic escapism. There was something archaic and mysterious about books anyway; a mystical element could make it even more interesting. The publishers, in the interest of producing a run-away bestseller would be publishing the last revelation of a vengeful God. This would work for the publishers, and Isaiah for that matter, so long as the last prophecy was in line with the grumblings of the general populace. So long as God's enemies were the reader's enemy, which Neal surmised would be whomever was behind the problems with energy, and whatever other social problems he came up with in the course of writing his narrative. Neal still wasn't sure about the religious aspect of the story, but at the moment he had no other ideas.

Neal went back to the idea of publishing houses competing to get the first paper book out. How intense would it get? Would people kill for it? Neal briefly considered making a corporate villain out of one of the publishers who had denied his first book, but thought better of it. Isaiah's publishers could keep his name a secret, because a previous contender had his notes stolen and was beaten up, and then despite their precautions someone in the know could be bribed and then Isaiah and Johanna would have to go on the run. That seemed a little far-fetched. What would probably happen, in real life anyway, is that the book would be published in print, displayed in stores, and then completely ignored. By the established logic of the story, for the time being anyway, physical books hadn't been published for the last hundred years, give or take. If people saw a book in the store they wouldn't really know what to do with it. Aside from that, would anyone still be reading anyway? The story assumed that they would be in some capacity, through ebooks, probably websites and blogs, as well resurgent newspapers. It seemed likely that stories at the very least, would retain public interest. In reality, audiobooks would probably have all but replaced ebooks by this time. Nonetheless, books, like Biblical names, had been around for some time after all. But books, as a rule (there are notable exceptions of course) had never made millionaires of their authors. As such, why would anyone pursue violence in the pursuit of publishing the first paperback, or hardback, in a hundred years? Why would that ever, at any

point in history, be a surefire moneymaking scheme? It could be a friendly competition. Who could write the next paperback? Win a cash prize? There could be friendly rivalry, the story could be a little more light-hearted, a competition that brought hope into people's lives in a time of darkness. The last prophecy and/or revelation wouldn't really work in that scenario. Isaiah could be struggling to find a theme for his story, and then he meets Johanna, who trains him in the fine arts of writing with a pen. He becomes inspired by Johanna and begins to write a quirky little love story. When she reads it, she's both embarrassed and flattered, knowing that the heroine is a representation of her. The first book could be one of hope for the dark times in which the characters were living. Neal wasn't sure about that. He always liked darker material, but maybe that was why he should branch out. On the other hand, writing something you're not that in too could be a recipe for writing a forgettable piece of crap. Neal still clung to the idea that Isaiah's book should have a darker tone. A friendly competition as the backdrop to a charming love-story didn't really appeal to him, and as such the story itself would suffer. If he forced it, it would be mediocre, at best. So, dark it was. Though he still thought a scenario wherein publishers would kill prospective writers was a bit far-fetched. Publishers, CEO's, and the like, are always skittish of new things. Nonetheless, they do love new-old things, as in remakes and reproductions. But physical violence was still a bit far-fetched. That being said, there could still be plenty of underhanded, cut-throat business practices at play, such as breaking in and burning manuscripts, or once again hackers. As such, Isaiah would need to go into hiding so to speak, the only people who would know where he was were his publisher and Johanna.

Neal was satisfied with the ideas he had come up with so far. What could the ending be though? It seemed obvious the ending needed to be the book being published. Maybe Isaiah could be walking through a store and see it on the shelf, pick it up, and feel a swell of pride as the curtains figuratively dropped. Neal didn't like that idea. He preferred a more ambivalent ending. He immediately decided that instead of that ending, Isaiah would bring the manuscript in and his editor would take it to read. He would meet up with Johanna, and she would ask what happens next. He'd reply with something generic like, "now I wait to see what the publisher says. In the meantime, how about a drink?" Though that wouldn't really work with the whole revelation idea. Would Isaiah as a prophet be so nonchalant with handing over the word of God to a publisher to be edited? Beyond that, what if God's revelation didn't sell well? That could be an interesting post-script. Though someone would certainly think there was some "point" to the story, and the "message" could really go either way: It didn't sell well because of the sinfulness of the world or because God just wasn't relevant anymore, critics would make up their own minds based on whatever their presuppositions were. The ironic thing is that Neal had no point in mind, and though he had been raised in a church, didn't really consider himself to be a Christian, or religious in any capacity. Once again, he was beginning to question the religious aspects of the current iteration of the story. He decided not to scrap it all together, but he'd see if he couldn't turn it in another direction. No other ideas were presenting themselves, and you can't force fiction into a mold, or at least he couldn't. If he were to force the story in a direction it didn't organically lend itself to it would inevitably feel stilted, it would be sub-par. He was realistic enough to know that what he produced might not necessarily be great, but it could at least feel natural. He'd just have to see where he ended up.

Now, to begin. He scrolled up in his document, past all his notes, to the top, to the two potential titles, deleted "the Last Prophecy," deciding he preferred "the Last Revelation," and then hit undo. Title would come later. He re-read the first paragraph:

Paper's stock value had risen dramatically in the last few years, given the ubiquitous power-outages. Who would've thought that in the mid 22nd Century investing in paper could make you a small fortune.

He considered a few edits, and then decided he still like that for the beginning. He sighed, hit save, and began typing.

Isaiah was a nervous sort. He lacked confidence. Psychiatric drugs and evolution had still not managed to weed out neuroticism. Isaiah had inherited his own from an unknown genetic progenitor. Both of his parents were confident, bold, and disappointed in their son, despite his relative success with writing. As is so often the case in history, those who lack confidence have a formidable task foisted upon them; one that they would never willingly choose. Isaiah was soon to be saddled {find a different word for saddled} with a calling for which he felt inadequate.

Neal didn't like that last sentence. He didn't like the word saddled and to say that Isaiah felt inadequate to the task of transcribing the word of God didn't really get the point across. Inadequate was not forceful enough, not by a long-shot. He remembered the old Bible story about Isaiah's despair over his own sinfulness, standing in the presence of an almighty and perfect being, the juxtaposition reminding him how unworthy he was, and that strangely vivid comment about being "a man of unclean lips. Unworthy, that might work.

Isaiah was soon to be tasked {better, but still not right} with a calling for which he knew he was unworthy.

"For which he knew he was unworthy?" Was that grammatically correct? The phrase seemed all right on paper, but when he spoke it aloud he didn't care for the way it sounded, though he couldn't necessarily say why. He decided to get a drink and take a short break.

Neal had always had simple tastes in alcohol. Light beers and whiskey and cokes, he never ventured beyond these staples. He still wanted to get some work done that evening so he chose to start with beer. Whiskey tended to knock him out, or at the very least muddle his creativity and confuse his typing. With beer, he could still retain clarity of thought and the basic motor skills necessary for writing.

Returning to the keyboard, he immediately began to regret every decision he had made about the story thus far. It was stupid, all of it. He opened a new document and typed out some word vomit describing his failure as an author. With all his despair and doubt spent, he re-read what he had written about his own inadequacy and decided that with a little editing, it would make a good monologue for Isaiah. He copy and pasted it into the notes section of his primary document and then scrolled back up to the last thing he had written in it.

He would have to come back to the sentence regarding Isaiah's inadequacy, or unworthiness, or whatever word he would eventually decide on. He'd come up with something, but for the time being he needed to press on.

Ebooks had become a novelty. Physical books were either rare collector's items or display pieces in museums. All forms of written media, books, news articles, blogs, had evolved into what they called in the old days audio-books. Now when one said book, they meant audio-book. No one ever read books anymore, but they still listened to them quite a bit.

There was a lot wrong with that new paragraph. Neal was not really happy with any of it, but it would have to suffice for now. The structure had to be built before he could apply the paint, before he could make it pretty.

Neal decided to skip ahead to Isaiah attending the calligraphy class. He'd cobble everything together later.

Nervous, as always, Isaiah opened the door and stepped in to the calligraphy parlor. We've come to the point where we don't even need to point out that Isaiah was nervous, we can assume it as his normal state of being. From now on, I'll let you know if he's ever anything but nervous.

That's a good paragraph. Neal might think differently later, but he rather liked it for the time being. He decided not to read it again just yet, he chose to remain satisfied.

The receptionist took his name. Isaiah

Neal looked around the room at the books on his shelf and settled on Radzinsky.

The receptionist took his name. Isaiah Radzinsky. He'd purchased the more expensive private session instead of signing up for the scheduled group session {redundant word, find another word for session}. He knew in the group there would be wine drinking and giggling women trying to master their O's and learning how to cross their T's. He wasn't there for fun. He had to learn, and quickly. He couldn't be slowed down by a group of merry-makers monopolizing the instructors time, and thereby wasting his. The receptionist spoke again. His instructor was Johanna

Neal once again searched his shelves for a last name.

Johanna van Buren.

Not Johanna van Buren.

Johanna Greene.

That was better. On the other hand, why would the receptionist give Isaiah his instructors full name? Johanna Greene was the name to go with, but Neal would work that in somewhere else.

His instructor was Johanna. She'd call him when she was ready. Isaiah sat down and took in his surroundings, trying to ignore the group loudly discussing why they had decided to learn how to write. In the end, he couldn't. He learned a great deal about their motivations. One man was attending the class so he could write his wife a love note for her birthday. There was a chorus of "awws" and sounds of general approval. It had been difficult coming up with an explanation for where he was right now, which got several laughs. One couple thought it would be something fun to do together. An elderly woman remembered that her mother had once had a "pen-pal," a concept which she had to explain to the group, and she had recently discovered that some people had taken up the practice again. She was very interested in participating in a pen-pal revival. A young man grimly informed everyone that with the rolling black-outs getting worse he was afraid of being completely without power. When and if that happened, writing would become a necessary skill. There were a few grunts of assent, but silence was the general response. Finally, their instructor, Jade, invited them all into her parlor.

Neal leaned back for a moment, thinking about Johanna's entrance.

Isaiah leaned back, enjoying the silence, becoming aware for the first time of the music playing overhead. It was something vaguely oriental, like the decor. A door he hadn't noticed opened in the corner. A slender, blonde woman in a white kimono with a cherry-blossom pattern stepped out. She had smooth, flawless skin, a strong, but not too masculine chin, high cheekbones, and bottomless brown eyes.

Bottomless?

Deep brown eyes. As she walked Isaiah noticed that she had a limp. As though one leg were longer than the other. Isaiah hoped that she was his instructor. When she spoke with that smooth, full voice, calling his name, he was happy to find he had gotten his wish. He followed her into the private parlor and took his seat opposite her.

Neal had decided that one of Johanna's legs was indeed longer than the other, a birth defect. He wasn't sure where that had come from, but the minute this character walked through that door and embedded herself into the story, he knew that she limped. This one physical flaw gave her a reality that she would not have otherwise, the flaw made her into a person, something tangible, almost tactile. He imagined that having one leg longer than the other could lead to back pain. He'd have to do some research on it.

Paper, pen, and ink were laid out on the table before them. Johanna looked up at him and asked him why he was taking the class. Though her tone was friendly the question was clearly a formality. They were polling their clients. Her eyes changed from brown to a neon blue. He lied and said it was out of curiosity, he liked to learn new things. She smiled and said that writing was good for the brain. It was a shame it had fallen out of practice. The first part of the lesson went over the proper way to hold the pen. She demonstrated and then asked him to pick up his own pen. His grip was clumsy, and she reached across the table to adjust it, offering advice as she gently shifted his fingers. Her touch thrilled him in the form of a shiver, which he did his best to hide. Once his pen grip was correct, she took a sheet of paper and carefully wrote a capital and lower case "A." She told him to do the same. He took up a piece of paper and began. His hand shook as he wrote, or rather drew, an imitation of what she had written. The result was a wavy "A" with occasional jagged marks leaping from the primary line, as though he had been startled while writing. It was a very inexperienced "A," and given his nature, he was embarrassed by it. She said good job, and even though he didn't believe her it made him feel better.

"Did you know" she said, "many years ago, people would sign documents to indicate they approved payment for items, or to indicate that they agreed to legal terms?"

He was mildly incredulous. He had never signed anything of course. Every payment, every legal agreement had been authorized through finger-print or face scanning for years now. He remembered his father paying with a card of some kind at a grocery store many years ago. At some point the card went away, while the machine stayed the same. Instead of inserting a card, his father just placed his thumb on the tiny screen. He couldn't recall when the switch happened, but now he couldn't imagine using a card, let alone a pen in any transaction.

She wrote a "B" in both upper and lower case and told him to copy it. He did better the second time, but not by much. "You should consider taking our Cursive course after this one. I think you have a natural talent for this." It was the inevitable up-sell. They started early, he hadn't even written a complete sentence yet. Her eyes turned from neon blue to hazel. She smiled and he almost agreed to the cursive course. He caught himself just in time, "let's see how this goes first."

Neal's beer was finished. He threw the bottle away, leaned back, and read his last few paragraphs. He was enjoying it so far. Depending on how their relationship grew within the next few pages would determine whether Isaiah was writing a prophecy or a book. Either way, Johanna would figure prominently in the story as a guide or a muse. If the book was a prophecy,

she would be a guide, as far as the writing went that is, if it was just a book, she could be a muse. Within the space of a few sentences she had become the most important character in the story. She would determine where the narrative went. Drama or romance? In a very real sense, it was up to her. Neal couldn't create a person ex-nihilo, regardless of the fact that he was writing fiction. Every character he wrote brought themselves to life. Neal was not a creator he was just a conduit, he never really knew where they came from. His creative mind was a primordial fog, and all the characters that dotted that amorphous landscape emerged from the haze as pre-formed beings, every part of them subconsciously borrowed from the thousands of people Neal encountered in day-to-day life. Johanna was writing herself just as much as Isaiah was, and in the end, they would decide their own fates.

With his beer finished it was time to switch to whiskey and coke. Drink made, he returned to his computer and once again read what he had written. He made a few edits, but for the most part he was satisfied. He took his first sip, leaned over the keyboard and began again.

C naturally followed B, then D and so on and so forth. Isaiah soon had a whole stack of papers representing the alphabet. Remembering how much the paper for the book had cost he wondered how the Calligraphy parlor stayed in business. The classes were expensive, but it seemed like the price of paper would eat up the entirety of the parlor's overhead. Everything Isaiah had written had effectively been in a size 96 font. Yet somehow, he was supposed to learn how to write multiple sentences on one sheet of paper.

Neal didn't like this paragraph as much as its predecessor. He'd fix it eventually. He spent too much time on the economics of running a calligraphy parlor in the 22nd century. It was interesting to him, but he wasn't sure how interesting it would be to his audience.

The time he paid for was almost up, and Isaiah wasn't any closer to knowing how to write. Learning how to write would take just as long as writing the book itself, and he didn't have that kind of time. He didn't even know what he was going to write.

"We have ten more minutes. Would you like to write a sentence?"

"I'd like you to write a sentence for me."

Isaiah was surprised by his own boldness. Johanna seemed to like it. She must get bored with the teaching. Always repeating the same stock sentences with every customer. Finally, someone was mixing things up a bit.

"OK, sure, what would you like me to write?"

"I have to write a book. With a pen. I don't have time to learn to write, not really. I need your help. How much would you charge to write it while I dictate?"

Johanna thought for a moment, intrigued.

"That was more than one sentence. Why are you writing a book with a pen?"

"It's going to be the first paper book in a hundred years. I can't put it on anything that can be hacked. It's got to be the first, otherwise there's no point. Publisher made that pretty clear to me."

"I charge by the hour. Same rate as the lesson. I want my name on the book somewhere, as dictated to Johanna Greene, or something like that. Also, I want to talk to my lawyer. I think a percentage of the royalties will be in order."

Isaiah was surprised to get an answer so quickly. The truth was he couldn't make any deals with her without going through his publisher. He had the feeling that Mack would cave. This wasn't just about making money it was about making history. There was no way Isaiah could master writing in time, the stack of paper with chicken-scratch letters proved that much.

"I'll let you know by tomorrow. Should I call the front desk?"

Johanna took a piece of paper and wrote her name and number down. She handed it to Isaiah who folded it and put it in his pocket.

"We'll talk soon Ms. Greene."

"You still have four minutes. Anything else you want me to write?"

"We'll just say it's four minutes you owe me."

Neal liked the dialogue, but Isaiah was coming across as a little too confident. He was supposed to feel incompetent and frightened after all. A man who had a brush with God. The dialogue could stay so long there were a few lines where Isaiah expressed the same disbelief that he would speak so confidently as that which Neal felt. Isaiah spoke as Neal wanted to speak, not as either of them actually spoke. Isaiah wasn't supposed to be Neal, but he essentially was, and as the story progressed, he would inevitably become more so. Isaiah was an autobiographical cross-section of his progenitor. Neal wouldn't bother to hide it. To work against it would be to block the organic growth of the story. There had been a few times in Neal's life where he spoke and acted as he actually wanted to. Isaiah could enjoy those few triumphs as well.

Neal took another break and made another drink. He was beginning to feel the effect of the alcohol. He was not yet incoherent, and as such neither were his characters, but with every sip he, and they, were approaching the tipping point, where they would all sink into a haze, where they would blur, lose their distinction, and more and more of Neal would bleed into the story and taint it. The more he drank the more the story became a carrier of his own neuroticism, the more it would become a vehicle for his own grievances. The more he drank the more likely it became that he would rob the story of its individuality, making it serve his own purposes rather than allowing it to weave itself into a natural, cohesive narrative. Knowing all this, he still drank. It was getting late after all, he didn't expect to be productive for much longer anyway, so why not? He downed the rest of his drink and made another.

Isaiah waited nervously in his apartment

Neal and his future readers had already agreed that Isaiah was always nervous.

Isaiah sat in his chair, waiting for Johanna. She was late. Not by much. But in his current state of unrest a few minutes after the agreed upon time felt like a time-served life sentence.

Neal didn't backspace, he just re-wrote the last sentence.

In his current state of unrest a few minutes after the time they agreed to felt like a life served behind bars, with all the dissatisfaction and time wasted to go with it.

He was dancing around the idea he wanted to convey. The second sentence was closer, though he didn't like it any better. He'd have to come back to it. Write first and correct later. Just type. Finger vomit and mop up the mess.

Ten minutes past and no sign of Johanna. She knew he was a freak and decided against it. She'd make her excuses later. Something had come up. Sick mother, car accident, something, anything,

didn't matter what. Slowly but surely that nagging voice of doubt was drowned out by that second one, the one he had heard just a few days ago, the one that spoke with confidence, with purpose, the one that didn't come from him, the voice from the outside.

"She'll be here," it promised. "She has her own part to play in this."

Isaiah was not comforted by this. He feared he was dragging an unwitting accomplice into an insane project no one would ever knowingly agree to. No prophet ever prophesied willingly, at least none that ever spoke the truth. Charlatans joyfully accepted prophecies {different word than prophecy, it's been used too much, don't want to use revelation, look up synonyms} when it came from their own heart and lust for money. His words, not Isaiah's, His, were fire. Isaiah would repeat, and Johanna would transcribe. Neither of them would like it. Both of them would know the words were right in ways they could never really grasp. They would want them, the words, to be wrong, but they would know that everything they wrote was the truth.

Neal read and re-read the last few paragraphs. He was afraid that he was starting to make a point of some kind. He didn't want to make a point. He didn't like stories with messages. He knew he'd just have to play it out and see where it all went.

When Johanna finally arrived, she was completely soaked. She'd been caught in the rain. Isaiah hadn't even noticed the rain, he'd been too worried about getting started, about her being on time. The paper she'd brought was ruined. That must've cost a pretty penny {no, replace that with something later, pretty penny is stupid}. He handed her a towel and dug out the pen and paper that his publisher had bought him. He made her some tea. Her body shook out the remaining chill, slowly relaxing, absorbing the warmth of the tea and the heater with the holographic fireplace. She looked up at him expectantly.

"I'm ready."

Neal hit save and leaned back in his chair. Ordinarily he didn't like to write disconnected episodes like he had done thus far. You never knew how the transitions would turn out. It was better to struggle through a linear story and retroactively fix the weaker points than try to connect a series of disembodied sequences. In his experience at least. Writing separate scenes, so to speak, and connecting them after the fact had never worked well for him. Part of the problem was that he still didn't have a true beginning to work from or any semblance of an ending to work towards; all he had were stops along the way. Drink hadn't yet robbed him of his ability to write. He had to at least write a real beginning to the story. Again, he went back to his original opening.

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He still liked those two sentences. They established the setting pretty well. They drew the reader in, or at least he thought they did, by referencing a common issue in his setting, power outages, a surprising economic development, the new relevance of paper, the time period: the 22nd century, and they did it all with a slightly ironic and/or sarcastic tone. He couldn't find anything wrong with the first paragraph. The second paragraph, yet to be written, was what was proving to be the problem. He didn't want to introduce Isaiah with the paragraph about him being a nervous sort, he wanted to change that anyway. "Nervous sort" sounded too gay-nineties English Lit. Neal had a strong sense of who Isaiah was, he was mostly Neal after all, but Neal knew he had to mask that as much as possible. Despite his confidence in the character of Isaiah,

and what he was entrusted to do: convey the last revelation of God (Neal had decided this would be the over-arching plot since nothing else had presented itself), he had no idea as to how to actually introduce him. It was obvious of course. Neal made himself his last, or so he promised himself, drink of the evening and returned to his computer.

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Eventually publishers, who now worked exclusively with audiobooks, turned to their authors to produce the first paper book in over a hundred years; hoping the novelty of a hardback, or a paperback, depending on the cost, would make them both a small fortune and cut them out a small slice of history. Gaiman Publishing turned to Isaiah Radzinsky.

Radzinsky was a nervous sort. He lacked confidence. Psychiatric drugs and evolution had still not managed to weed out neuroticism. Isaiah had inherited his own from an unknown genetic progenitor. Both of his parents were confident, bold, and disappointed in their son, despite his relative success with writing. As is so often the case in history, those who lack confidence have a formidable task foisted upon them; one that they would never willingly choose. Isaiah was soon to be tasked with a calling for which he felt unworthy. In the meantime, he had to come up with a story. The pressure was proving to be a creative block. Then he struck upon an idea.

At some point, or so it seems, every writer thinks it's a good idea to write about an author with writer's block. As though writing about someone, who is clearly having the same issue that they are having will somehow serve as a springboard into something wildly new and creative. Isaiah had come to that point, and it would have to work, he had nothing else, for the time being that is.