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# *Late Nights, Last Rites, and the Rain-Slick Road to Self- Destruction*

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It's three in the morning. A rainy night on a date of no importance in particular. The headlights of a student just now pulling into the parking lot grab my attention. I scoff, inwardly scolding the stranger for being up so late. And yet, here I am, sipping coffee at three in the morning. I have been working on this stupid essay for four days now, and, tonight, for eight hours straight. I'm tired and frustrated to the point where I would scream if I knew it wouldn't wake my roommates. The sentence you are reading right now was jotted down after six arduous paragraphs of stale, rambling fluff. Most people have written this sort of thing at one point or another. It's the kind of writing that you want to tear out and burn so that no other human being on the planet is able to bear witness to the catastrophic failure that has sprung forth from your mind. In fact, that is exactly what I did: I just erased several dozen hours of hard work from existence. Despite this, I find myself smiling as I recline comfortably (not really) in my dorm-supplied wooden chair at three in the morning. Perhaps, if I glanced at my reflection in the mirror, I would not see a smile, but the face of an exhausted writer. But I'm smiling. On the inside, at least. I can feel it. I'm smiling because I have finally figured out what I'm doing. In the spectacular failure of my own writing, I have, in a sense, discovered myself.

However, before I explain how I came to that revelation, one must understand the process that has led up to this point. I have been staring at the same six pathetic, jumbled paragraphs of text for four days now. My eyes have passed over the words so many times that I could probably recite the entire essay by heart if I had to. It was the first paper I had written in a long time that I felt genuinely proud of. Yet, it was only after comparing papers with a friend of mine that I realized that my essay was completely out of whack. As my friend put it so eloquently between bites of a barbecue chicken sandwich, "You write weird." I do indeed, I admitted to myself upon reflection. But that isn't bad, is it? It's a quirk. It makes me distinctive and interesting, doesn't it? I second-guessed myself. I tend to do that a lot. His essay was immaculate: well-worded, organized, and objective. It seemed to be the epitome of what other essays should look like. My essay, on the other hand, looked like it was ripped from the script of a soap opera, or from the angry last rites of some dying cancer patient. "The devil is in the details," he mentioned, while I scanned over his paper for the second time, as if that was supposed to blow me out of the water with some deep, philosophical resonance. I simply scowled at him. I felt awful. I felt like my work was awful. Ideas and statements and paragraphs that I had applauded myself over now seemed bitter and loose and uninteresting. Something had changed. I took it back to my room and stared at it. I read it twice, and then twice

more. I paced around the four feet of walking space in my room, reading it aloud, as if that would put the text under a different light. I had to open my window. I needed fresh air. “The devil is in the details,” the voice of my friend chimed from someplace inside my head. “What does that mean?!” I screamed at the top of my lungs, startling a girl on the sidewalk below.

I think it was at that moment that the weight of my failure finally crushed me. I had put so much heart and soul into what I had written that I didn’t want to admit to myself that it was awful. I didn’t want to, but I did. I had to. I threw away the draft and deleted the copy on my computer, smiling as I did it for reasons unknown to me at the time. I had spent more time and effort on the darn thing than I care to mention, and here I was, smiling as it figuratively burned in the wastebasket. “I’ll just start over,” I thought to myself. The moment my fingers touched the keyboard, however, something clicked. I understood. I realized what made my essay so different from that of my friend. Not bad, necessarily, but different. Like snowflakes, I think. I knew exactly what to write about. I knew that the nuclear meltdown-sized failure that I had constructed for myself could be dissected, line by line. Everything that I was looking for that described me as a writer was staring daggers at me in my trash bin. I dug it out from under a half-eaten piece of pizza and an empty box of band-aids. My eyes darted over the words again and the more I read, the more I smiled. Everything that I needed was, literally, all there, in black and white, clear as crystal. I remembered what I was thinking and feeling while I wrote it and compared it to my expectations, what my essay was “supposed” to look like. I jotted notes down all over the draft and once I knew what was wrong, I took a step back and examined the changes that had to be made. Even without a single word down on paper, my new essay began to rise from the ashes like a phoenix, growing stronger and more brilliant by the second. Hoping to learn from the old paper, I began to write my analysis of the analysis of my writing style, still unsure of whether or not to allow myself to make the same mistakes twice.

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The most predominant fault that I had to address (much to my dismay) was the fact that on the inside I am, essentially, a senile old man. Perhaps not physically, but I write like an old man speaks. I like to tell long-winded stories that may or may not interest my audience. I tend to ramble. In fact, I’m still rambling. We are four paragraphs into this thing and I’m only just now getting to the meat and potatoes of the paper. I also use excessive detail when it’s not necessary. Everything that escapes my cracked old lips is seasoned with a touch of salty, dry humor that always seems to embarrass the rest of the family, especially when guests are over for dinner. “He can’t help it,” the aunts and uncles will say to their children as they pass the green beans and honey-glazed ham around the table, pretending to be put off by my behavior. “He’s just old and senile.” However, despite their “shock” and verbal disapproval, they are laughing on the inside. Life is just far too boring without a good laugh every once in a while. I write the way I talk, and I talk with a certain unexpectedly snarky wit that’s hard to maneuver around. The casual nature of my writing may stem from the fact that I can never truly take a written assignment seriously. I strive for a good grade, and will work as hard as possible to achieve one, but there is a voice in the back of my head that is effectively scoffing at the ridiculousness of some assignments and expectations that I have had to complete and live up to.

Perhaps it’s because I do not want to become what my friend, and many others are: cutouts of the perfect student, examples to abide by. In a sea of perfect papers and flawless dissertations, maybe I’m struggling to keep my head above water. Many of the other writers are better swimmers than I, but perhaps that is only because I am being weighted down by my own expectations. After seeing my friend’s essay, I felt like my rubber dinghy was deflating, and all the signal flares in the

world couldn't save me. Maybe I didn't want to admit that I was sinking. It doesn't matter now. I jumped ship instead of ignoring my failure and going down with it like a stubborn captain. Some part of me felt confident enough to kick and scream my way to the top of the torrent. In a sense, that's exactly what I did. I kicked and screamed until three in the morning, and when I reached the shore, I was smiling again.

Another big problem with my essay, I realized, was one that was not even on the paper. It was in my head. On a good day, ideas flow from my mind like a raging river, with my fingers being the only floodgate. Sometimes, the current is so strong, that the ideas push through faster than my fingers can keep up. The ones that leak through are as good as lost forever, thanks to my pitiful memory and my rodent-sized attention span. I blame my mother: she was an insufferable grammar Nazi that forever ruined my ability to create fluid writing. I probably should have had some sort of lead-in transition for that statement, but I couldn't think of anything that would soften the blow. My mother would correct nearly every statement that came out of my mouth. "No, dear, it is 'My friends and I,'" she would say, or, "No, you are not 'done,' honey. You are 'finished.'" I tore my hair out for nearly a decade. She managed to drill my speech so hard that it leaked into my writing. Now every time I make a grammar or spelling mistake, I have to immediately go back and correct it, even if I'm in the middle of a word. I can't help it. I might explode if I don't.

In many cases, the sudden halt in my writing causes my figurative train of thought to completely fly off the rails, sending passengers and luggage flying in every direction. Their magical journey through the valley of Well-Worded Ideas and Self-Discovery has come to a screeching, uncomfortable halt. The earth-shattering statement that I formulated in my mind moments earlier was now lost forever, strewn somewhere under an old copy of *Newsweek* and a fat woman's lingerie. I'll get frustrated. I'll get depressed. I'll start trying to force my brain to come up with an alternative idea. Many times it will work. Other times, a succulent new idea will be waiting for me, wrapped up all nice and pretty with a bow, just outside the edge of my ability to express on paper; in which case I end up having to buckle down, take a number, and submit to the waiting game that always seems to accompany my planning process. However long I end up waiting is irrelevant; the moment my number is called is the happiest five-seconds of my life...at which point I'll realize that

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there is only enough meat in the package for a sentence or two. My willingness to get back in line without grumbling is testament to my stubbornness. Why else would I have been so hesitant to throw away my original essay?

Sometimes even I wonder what drives me to keep writing. I would imagine that there are not many other people who would willingly be up at three in the morning writing an essay, let alone be willing to say that he or she was having fun in the process. That's not to say I don't struggle. While writing the last essay (and even this one), I ran into more hang-ups than a telemarketing company. Those poor souls are willing to work eight hours a day, seven days a week, being yelled at over the telephone. I can't explain why anyone in the world would want to be one, but I can explain what keeps them from jumping out the window of their glass-sided office buildings. It's making the sale. Every once in a blue moon, the stars will align and all your hard work and patience pays off. As a writer, you don't have to operate phones for

a living to know what that must feel like, to be vindicated in your existence after running into dead ends for days, if not weeks on end. Stumbling across a bright new idea lifts your spirits, gives you ambition, and dries your socks off long enough for you to feel comfortable slogging back into the putrid bog of despair that makes up writing the other ninety percent of the time. Even as the sludge

is seeping back in, you'll still have a smile on your face (even at three in the morning) because you will be thinking of that sale.

It's part of the reason writing is so much fun. The ability to put anything down in words can be oddly liberating. Several years ago, one of my friends insisted that I fill a book with my "wonderful ideas." Well, what started out as a running gag became reality: it's now four years later and I am still writing what could loosely be called my autobiography. *Kareem and Me*, as it has been colloquially dubbed, spans several hundred pages and is full of inside jokes, ranting monologues, and stories based on real events that have had the truth stretched so thin that it looks like taffy. The later chapters began to spiral out of control, becoming some sort of pseudo novel, with well-developed characters and story arcs. By this point, however, the audience had disappeared. Interest in the book faded as friends forgot the project actually existed, but I kept writing. I'm still writing, if just for my own sake. Perhaps it helps me feel grounded in my own thoughts and emotions when they may be too absurd to express outwardly. I get to tell the stories that I want to hear and access parts of myself that I am sometimes not fully aware of yet. In truth, starting my essay over was an adventure.

Two days have passed since the inception of my new essay, and after some heavy revision, the paper has finally come to fruition. However, despite the fact that I felt proud of my introspective opus, I knew there was one test that I had to pass before I could truly let my guard down. With less than contained excitement, I hunted my friend down, finding him in a convenience store buying lunch, and had him give it a once-over. Besides the fact that he seemed irked by his cameo early on, he smiled the whole way through. It wouldn't matter what he said at this point; I made my sale. I had been vindicated. My mission was complete. The subtle smile that he was having such a hard time hiding completely offset the hours of hard work that I had put into it. His reaction was my entire motivation for writing. "Well?" I questioned over his shoulder, my anticipation getting the better of me. He stumbled into a display of Frito's in surprise and tried to play it off by taking a sip of coffee while picking up one of the bags. He handed me the essay back. "It's fine, I guess. You still write weird," he said, forgetting to wipe the smile off his face.

"I know!" I squealed in delight. "Isn't it great?"

My friend just rolled his eyes. To me, it was great. The weirdness that had forced me to scrap hours of hard work now stood proudly by my side as an invisible ally. Instead of fighting it, I would embrace it. It is an extension of my personality, after all. I would like to think that the weirdness has helped me complete this essay, but, then again, maybe I am still just staring down the rain-slick road to self-destruction.