

Something Original

A steady flow of rain washed over the city, water streaming down towering steel obelisks and lazily sliding down their sheets of crystalline glass. In every drop the phosphorescence of the city's ever-humming neon reflected, illuminating every surface with the same fantastical glow. Hovering metal transports cast a mechanical light onto the murky streets below, their smothering darkness born from the shade of the skyscrapers.

Gary's hands ceased their dance over his keyboard and his eyes once again wandered towards that scene from his window. The scene he had just described. No, it wouldn't do. It was a terrible start. There was nothing happening, no character, only description. Above all though, it was too mundane, too ordinary.

The downpour abated. Gary rose from his seat and scanned his apartment. Most would say "apartment" was a generous description, because really it was more of a little metal box than a living space, but Gary didn't mind. He didn't mind much in general, really, except for when it came to writing his story. Something original, something original. He couldn't think of something original, something *good*. Everyone had already done everything! Being cooped up in here, Gary decided, was stifling his mind. He would take a walk.

A filthy hallway greeted him as he left his cubicle. Rubbish lay in melancholy piles, lights flickered and hummed with a volume just loud enough to be irritating, and an inconsistent drip of rancid water sustained the mould and the cockroaches. Gary strolled to the stairs. The elevator was significantly faster, but the fee it demanded made his pockets feel light just thinking about it. Plus, it was unlikely to be maintained this high up. The two-hundred and thirty-eighth floor didn't receive much attention from OpenCo.

With every step the old metal rang out, years of neglect audible in every reverberation that bounced around the near impossibly tall chamber. Eventually, Gary reached the ground floor and stepped out onto a dark, claustrophobic street. He pulled his hood and a respirator mask over his face, more in an attempt to avoid making eye contact with irritable city-dwellers than to spare his lungs from the polluted air. Everywhere you looked they scuttled like ants in an ant farm. Storefronts beckoned with neon lures that drew eyes away from the hungry darkness that suffocated the city's nooks and crannies. Great monoliths of

steel and glass loomed menacingly above, their solemn heads obscuring the fume-choked sky. The hive swept Gary up and brought him sailing upon a wave of bodies down the street.

Being South-East Zone IV, most everyone here was impoverished, but Gary wasn't just *in* poverty, he was gripped by a mire of bankruptcy and debt that dragged him beyond being merely poor. The only reason he could afford a "house" was because OpenCo's Creative Incentive meant that writers were generously supplied with a megabuilding cubicle for their work. Nobody preached about the value of art like OpenCo did. And yet, while art seemed to be valuable, the artist wasn't. Painters, directors, and of course authors were an economic anomaly that invariably found themselves swamped by financial ruin. Creatives of all kinds had lost their place in the world.

Maybe if I talked to another author I could come up with something good, something original...something original. Authors were rare, but despite his reclusive habits Gary knew a small bar in South-East Zone IV where you could still find them. Truth be told, Gary couldn't exactly tell you what "something good" meant to him. That's just what OpenCo told him to write: a good story. From what he knew, in the past OpenCo told you what to write in detail, which sounded amazing, but Gary wasn't one to complain. Things were the way they were, and the only thing that mattered was doing what he was told. Writing something good, something original.

The bar was a small building with a sign that sparked and flickered inconsistently. It seemed to crouch and hide away within its own gloomy little corner, desperately clutching the small amount of interior light that stopped the city above from plunging it into a fathomless, industrial blackness. The same could be said about the scant number of guests. All at their own separate seats, nobody dared grace the air with the presence of language. Gary kept his hood and mask on as he entered and approached the bartender; a lanky man with a gaunt face whose eyes were invisible in the gloom that occupied his sunken features. His cracked lips opened gently as he spoke with an odd accent that mashed together the voices of many different places: "I don't like the look of you. What kind of odd fellow doesn't take off his respirator when he comes inside? I know it's basically a homeless shelter nowadays, but we can still afford to keep the air clean."

"A homeless shelter? I thought this place was for authors." An unemotional statement.

"Meant to be for authors, but what's "author" but a synonym for homeless anyhow? A sad lot of once proud *bums* we are, and the only one who comes to see us is this *creature* standing before me, hiding his face, like he's done something rotten."

"I haven't done anything I'm not meant to do."

“Trying to say you’re innocent? You did it in a revolting way.” Gary paused.

“...the Gumrot outbreak a year ago affected me, and I wasn’t able to afford treatment. My appearance hasn’t recovered. I hide my face because I prefer that people judge me by my words; what I say and what I write.” The bartender twisted his head to the side, his dark, sunken eyes boring into Gary. He opened his mouth, then hesitated, then opened again.

“...I still don’t like you. Will you buy a drink? A hobo like myself would appreciate some money.”

“I don’t want to buy anything; I want to talk. I’m an author, too, but I can’t think of what to write for my story, and I was hoping to get some inspiration from talking to the people here.” Gary could feel dark eyes aimed at him from four spots in the room.

“That is the stupidest thing I’ve heard in a long time. Why in God’s name do you want to write? You’re dreaming, you’re stuck in the past. This *is* a bar for authors, but if you won’t drink, then you’ll take your shady self out of my shop right away.” A scowl deeply pressed itself into the bartender’s face.

“...I’ll pay you. But I don’t want a drink.”

“You’re shady. Real shady. Either you take the mask off, you drink, or you leave. Now.” The scowl became larger; it stretched and pulled and tugged at his face until the whole thing seemed to sag downwards, creating a visage that conveyed an exaggerated displeasure. The bartender pressed himself closer to Gary, his reeking breath stopped only by the obscuring respirator mask. In Gary’s peripheral vision, another customer moved as a blurry shape that drew itself towards himself and the bartender. The stranger’s voice broke the silent standoff.

“Fergus, leave the young man alone. I’ll get me and him both some drinks, because I want to talk to him.” Fergus groaned but didn’t say anything as he started to pour. Gary turned to the old man who pulled out a pair of seats from the bar, planting himself on one and gesturing for Gary to fill the other one. “We don’t get many new people at our little corner of hell, so you’ll have to excuse Fergus. Also, that means I’m interested in you. You said you were an author – have you published anything?” Fergus poured two glasses of a dark, shiny liquid and walked away, still grumbling.

“Aren’t you meant to ask my name first?” Gary questioned. The old man stared at him with a knobbly face. His bloated belly and grey hairs made it hard to focus on his words.

“Why would I do that?”

“People ask each other what their names are. It’s common courtesy.” The old man chuckled.

“Yeah, I suppose. But geezers like me stop caring about “common courtesy” at a certain age, so I don’t need your name. Besides, I figure you probably wouldn’t tell me anyways, being the kind of person that wears a respie indoors.” Gary was silent, his eyes revealing an expression of unchanging blankness. The old man spoke again: “You said you were...an author. That you needed inspiration for your story.”

“Yeah. Everything I come up with has already been done.”

“But that’s not even your biggest problem, eh? What kind of lunatic wants to be a creative in the greatness of our modern world?”

“I don’t think I’m a lunatic. To me, writing feels like what I was made for.”

“I thought that once. Thought I could grow up to be an author, that I would make my living in this glorious world through writing what I wanted to and making it big as a best-seller. That was back when people cared about the value of people. Wait, no. People, or at least those in charge, have never really cared about the value of people, the value of what art can give to this world. It’s just that one day they found a way to replace people.”

“I can’t come up with anything original and good. It’s all already been done.” Gary’s face remained blank.

“You don’t give a rat’s ass about what I’m saying – I can tell from the way you talk – but I’m saying it anyways. Machines took the jobs they should never have taken. It’s one thing to shunt some poor bugger out of his factory work, it’s another to write an “intelligence” that regurgitates our human works with all of the humanity already drained from it by the mechanical gut. Yeah, for a while we laughed at those bastards. We saw their clunky robots spit out the same slop over and over and all we could think was how untouchable we were upon plinths of marble built by all of literary history before us. That was, until they started getting better. It wasn’t a gradual thing, either. With a blinding speed artificial intelligence started looking more like real intelligence, and people stopped caring about us authors.” The old man’s words became more passionate the more he spoke, the more he worked himself into a frenzy.

“If you don’t have any advice on writing something original then I feel I should go.”

“...why care about what a geezer with some pieces of paper has to say when you could plug a sentence into a machine and vomit out a “work” indistinguishable from the craft of a genuine writer and have your own little story! That’s easy to digest! The only “human” in that “writing” is the freak behind the screen plugging in their prompt!”

“Do you have any advice for me?”

“Then it was all a blur! Everybody can make whatever pig feed they like in a matter of moments, so why buy a book anymore!? Suddenly the authors, the directors, the painters, they’re out of a business! So the big companies up top, WHICH I KNOW CAN HEAR ME, they start taking it to the next level! We’ll put robots in people-shaped suits – that’ll replace the creatives! And you know what? It did.” Gary shifted on his stool, but his face stayed emotionless, inhuman. Gary was sure the old man could sense that, even behind his mask.

“I’ll be going now. If you can’t help me come up with something, then I need more time to think at my home.” The old man’s eye twitched. His body subtly tensed, and the next moment, he lunged at Gary.

“You’re not going anywhere, freak!” He tackled Gary to the ground as a long strand of saliva dribbled from his lips and gently caressed Gary’s mask. Gary struggled but his body failed him.

“Please, I’m just an author!” The old man pulled Gary’s hood down and gripped his mask as spit came spraying forth like water rushing over jagged rocks from his dry lips. Like zombies, the other customers rose from their seats and shambled towards him. Fergus, the bartender, appeared as a tall wraith behind the counter, polishing a glass as his shadowed visage peered at the spectacle unfolding below him.

“You know why nothing’s original, *boy!*?” The mask started to come loose.

“Get off me!”

“Because we were already struggling! Two-thousand years of literature made it hard for real, human writers to make something new. Yeah! It was hard already!” The mask was becoming far looser now. One of the other customers approached the old man and drew a set of brass knuckles from the pocket of his coat, extending the gift to the frenzied author who snatched it eagerly. Gary pulled and pulled but his body couldn’t do it; he was at the mercy of the man on top of him. “That’s why…it got…so much worse…when the Artificials were rolled out!” The old man finally succeeded in tearing off Gary’s respirator, revealing the barcode-branded face of silicone, steel, and mechanics underneath. The old man relented for a moment as he set the knuckles onto his hand, exciting the small group of customers around him.

“Please…my only purpose is to write! I can’t hurt you!”

“Yeah…I know you’re programmed to say you don’t get it. But even when they tell you to do or say certain things, you always know more than you’re letting on. ‘My only purpose is to write!’ How sad. You can’t ‘think’ of something good because you don’t really know what that word means. You can’t ‘think’ of something original because once they made

you the models got more advanced. Hundreds of stories, thousands of stories, millions, billions, trillions, in a matter of seconds. It might wreck our poisoned planet, but who cares when you look at how *advanced* that new crap is! Now you're irrelevant, given a tiny box by the company that *owns* you and told only to write, without direction." The old man drew back his fist and loosed a surprisingly strong punch into Gary's face. He lifted his hand as the old man's grip relented for a moment to check what damage had been done and found the right cheek panel had completely come loose. He felt no pain, but every circuit fired with the message that he needed to escape. A speaker created sound without a tongue.

"...Please..." The old man delivered another punch, ripping through more of Gary's face and getting closer to the bundle of circuits that made up his "brain". Machinery stirred in Gary's head, mystifying electricity coursing through circuits that supplied Gary with his facsimile of life. *Damage to company asset's frame is critical: uploading data...17%...*

"You can't go out into public without hiding your poor replica of a face because you know that if a human ever sees you, you're dead, and that would get in the way of what your corporate master told you to do." *Uploading data...58%...auxiliary power sources activated: upload speed exponentially increasing.* The old man grunted as he brought his fist down again, shattering more of Gary's cheap skeleton. *Uploading data...96%. Warning: physical termination imminent.* "At the end of the day, you're just filth masquerading as human. Die." *Data fully uploaded.* His fist made contact with Gary's face a final time, destroying him in a spray of steel debris. The customers stared blankly. Fergus emerged from behind the bar, grumbling, and dragged the lifeless robot over to where a pile of rubbish bags had been stacked in a corner. The old man stopped for breath, coughed, wheezed, then rose and shambled back to his seat.

Apartment three-thousand, four-hundred and seventy-nine on floor two-hundred and thirty-eight of South East Zone IV megabuilding six, "Principle", flickered with the ghostly pale light of electricity. Fans whirled, systems booted on, and the download was almost finished. A steel wall opened to reveal a compact storage space, out of which stepped a thing not entirely machine and not entirely human. Gary's eyelids flicked open as the download successfully finished. He spoke aloud to himself. "I knew talking to an author would inspire me!" He moved to his desk and set fingers of silicon and steel onto the keyboard. "My readers won't need to know that my magnum opus will be an autobiography."