

A Musing

by Susan Garrett

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It was an Underwood — a heavy black metal casing with a bent 'w', and 'e' that stuck in only the most embarrassing positions, and an annoying tendency to eat rare and costly ribbons. It was inefficient, an eyesore, and a collector's item.

Benny wouldn't have traded it in for the world. Well, maybe for the undying devotion of Bo Derek, but that was a different type of passion. He'd typed his byline on that machine so many times, the keys had indentations that would fit no other fingers. Word processing would have been faster, dictating easier, but the Underwood had a history. The Underwood had words that the newer, modern methods of writing couldn't conceive. The Underwood had a sense of vision.

And Edgar Benedek had the Underwood.

Sitting in a chair before his typewriter, he picked up a clean piece of paper and inserted it between the rollers. He flexed his fingers like a pianist, pausing momentarily over the keys. With all the trips hither and yon, most of which involved chasing shadows with Dr. Jonathan MacKensie on the Georgetown Institute budget, his average words-per-week output had dropped from a torrent to a drizzle. Which meant that his income had also decreased proportionately. He owed it to his landlord to find some cohesion in the reams of notes he'd accumulated over the past month or so.

Moreover, he owed it to himself. Jack could stick to his old bones and pots. For most of his life, Benny had been in love with words, first verbal, then written. Words were toys, building blocks, pots of paint, the only girders that could reach to heaven and back. And he, in his way, was an artist. Even the thrill of tracking down the wildly bizarre and impossibly unusual paled with the ebb and flow of words, the black and white world brought suddenly and tenuously into existence with the aid of the Underwood.

The front door was locked, the doorman warned not to let anyone up under pain of losing his annual Christmas fifth. The answering machine was on, his conscience chiding him into leaving the audible scan on in case of emergencies. And Jonathan MacKensie was happily deluged by his classes, a busy week that Dr. Moorhouse didn't dare enliven with another assignment for her paranormal research project. The time was right.

Still, his fingers paused over the keys. There was something wrong. The paper was too white — too blindingly, pristinely white. And his notes...where was that bit about the haunted viola?

Benny picked up the stack of papers that rested beside him and shuffled them absently. He dusted off the table with his hand, chewed on the end of a pencil, even pounded his defenseless Snoopy eraser unmercifully.

The words just weren't there.

The phone rang and he ran for it, only remembering the machine was on when he'd taken the chair halfway across the room.

"Benny? What's shaking?" Jordy here. Listen, have I got a lead for you! This little old lady in Potstown, W-V-A says somebody's been digging up her garden...dirt flying everywhere, but nobody there. I'll give you an hour lead time on this, Benny, but that's all I can spare. There are a lot of up-and-comers waiting for your spot, fella. You call the toss. Later, babe."

"Up-and-comers," snorted Benny. "Wouldn't know a UFO from St. Elmo's fire." Still... He glanced back at the answering machine. Potstown. Sounded like a one-half horse town. No hotel to speak of. Local cuisine consisting of chicken fried steak and grits. Although grits and peanut butter...

The Underwood was waiting patiently. He returned to the table and patted the side of the black metal machine. "Okay, baby. Daddy's all revved up. Let's get cookin'."

His finger actually typed this time. Three letters.

T-H-E

"The?" asked Benny aloud. "I never start an article with an article. It just isn't done. It's not...articulate."

But the word remained. Sighing, he tore the paper from the machine and entered a clean sheet. T-H-E. Where the hell had that come from? Maybe he needed a drink — a caffeine fix, more like.

Pushing away from the Underwood with a feeling of guilt, he started to the kitchen. The phone rang again. He didn't stop at the kitchen door until the call was halfway through.

"Mr. Benedek? I'm sorry I didn't get you in, my name's Mamie Wazenbacker, from Potstown? Mr. Kerner gave me your number. He said you might want to know exactly what — hold on a minute. You — yes, you get away from there! Get right out of there or I'll call the authorities! Yes, right now. I'm going to — "

The call ended with a heavy click as the phone was slammed violently into the cradle. Just the thought of the blow made him wince. Automatically, Benny walked over to the answering machine, ready to disconnect it if Mamie Wazenbacker called back.

He remained there for several minutes, but the phone was silent. Up-and-comer, huh? Jordy wanted him on this one badly, but hadn't yet gotten desperate enough to crawl. Well, let Jordy sweat it out. Maybe he would take a jaunt to Potstown...in a few days. In fact, stringing Jordy along might just up the per-word ante, something his bank account sorely needed. The poor piggy was about stone dry.

But there was the Underwood, waiting in her silent glory. He sat down again and stared at the keys. It was his time, a moment for him to enjoy, not fulfill some mad editor's two column spread or a department chairwoman's research quota.

Why weren't the words coming?

"Hello, muse!" Benny exclaimed aloud. "Where are you when I need ya, babe? Any one of you." After all, there were twelve muses, surely one of them could — hold a minute. Twelve...or eight? Or seven? No, seven was the number of vestal virgins. Then where had eight come from? The eight labors of Hercules? Then there were seven hills of Rome, four calling birds, three cities on the Nile, two sister cities of sin...

He drifted off into a daydream, something to do with Dr. Moorhouse and a temple full of Vestal Virgins, then woke with a start when his elbow slipped from the desk. Rubbing the skinned joint, he shook his head. This would never do. What had he gotten done so far?

One word stared at him from the paper.

THE

He stared back. He hadn't typed that. He'd ripped that paper out.

But there the word was, in all its black and whiteness.

He leaned his head on his hand, then switched elbows quickly when he rubbed the wrong one against the table. Maybe he needed a vacation. Maybe he needed some inspiration.

Benny glared at the Underwood. Maybe he needed a new typewriter....

The phone rang again, but this time he didn't move. This was intentional. The Underwood was doing it on purpose to distract him. Well, two could play at that game!

Arms folded across his chest, Benny leaned back in his chair, the front legs tilted from the floor, only half-listening to the tape.

"...be home. Please be...you're not, are you?" It was Jonathan's voice, at a pitch he recognized at being just somewhat south of desperation. "Please, Benedek, if you're home and you're listening, GET ME OUT OF HERE! I'm in Potstown, West Virginia. Dr. Moorhouse sent me and — this tape is going to run out. I'm in the County jail. No, don't laugh, please! There was this mad old woman and she threatened to call the police and — what do you mean my minute is up? Does anyone have a dime? Bail, Benedek, I need b —"

The front legs of the chair dropped to the floor with a thump. Benny started to laugh, the sound continuing until his lungs felt like a bellows and the stitch in his side threatened to cut off his circulation. Tears flooded his eyes and still he laughed, pounding the table with his fist, even almost falling from the chair.

And when he'd gained enough control to lift his head from his arm and the chortles had fallen to an occasional giggle, he looked at the Underwood.

It sat there. Waiting.

"You little minx," he declared, grinning. "You knew. You knew this was going to happen, that if I got rolling I never would have heard those calls. And poor Jack. Poor Jack...!" He pressed his hands over his mouth to keep from exploding again at the thought of Jonathan facing off some old southern woman, probably at the end of a shotgun.

Benny shook his head, gazing with wonder at his little black marvel. He had some things to do. Wire money to Potstown and get Jack out of jail — although Jack was safe enough where he was, come to think of it. And it might teach him a little humility. Imagine! Going shadow chasing on his own, without backup!

Then there were the flight arrangements. Faster to take a shuttle to Kennedy to — what was the name of the airport in West Virginia, the one with all the planes? Take a car from there...next stop, Potstown! And freedom for Jack MacKensie, boy wonder.

Picking up his jacket and a few shirts lying around his living room, Benny headed for the door. Once there he paused and looked back at the maelstrom.

Heavy and metal and black, with a bent 'w' and an 'e' that did very bizarre things to a manuscript, the Underwood sat, waiting. He walked over to it, typed three more letters, then patted the casing affectionately. "Later girl. I promise."

Even after the door closed and the lock clicked, the Underwood remained, two words typed across the brilliant white paper.

THE END

And then the phone rang again.

"Benedek? Dr. Moorhouse. Have you heard from MacKensie? I assume he's called. I've sent him to Potstown...."

-the end-

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