

Writers' Block Redux

It was spring 2018 when I first realised I could compose a short story, even though I'd not done any creative writing since schooldays.



I tug the veil that clouds my distant memories: how did my teachers tell me to do this? Jot down themes. Hmm... what are my themes? I don't know yet. What else? Draw a diagram - or was it a list? It probably doesn't matter which. Then try to make connections. Semi-autobiographical. That's what people often start with, isn't it? But I'd need to mix it up a bit and add a twist at end.

I stare at the pristine page. It remains defiantly blank.

I hear baby birds chirruping hungrily. My pen meanders in filigree patterns, vaguely reminiscent of the tree blossoming by my window. At least the page isn't blank any more, but I'm not sure a story about a peach tree has much potential. I'm not Oscar Wilde.

As I go to make a mug of Earl Grey, I notice the startling beauty of the host of golden daffodils, dappled violet by an infiltrating crowd of crocuses.

Focus. I must focus. On something. Anything. Yes, writing anything is better than writing nothing - wasn't that one of Mrs Hardcastle's tips?

I decide on a homeopathic approach: writing about someone with writer's block. I'm a hard rationalist, but at this stage, anything's worth a try.



Alaric sat down for breakfast: Shreddies and a boiled egg, washed down with a mug of Earl Grey. The tea tasted a little strange, but pleasantly so; he gulped it down regardless.

He flicked through "*Communicator*", but put it aside when he realised he'd read that issue. He picked up the local paper, but when he spotted the headline "Councillor Jonas Should Of Declared Personal Interest in Pub Plans", he threw it angrily in the bin - only to fish it out for the recycling pile. Then he put it by his PC, so he'd remember to send an email saying they "should've" used a proper copyeditor. He might even offer his own services.

But as he glanced at his computer, he noticed that the scraps and jottings for his fledgling novel were pixelated by a thin layer of dust, gently twinkling in the April sun. Poignant evidence of his long fallow period.

So he tossed the paper back in the recycling and resolved to head for the bluebell woods, hoping that would lift his mood and liberate his thoughts.

Walking boots tied, jacket zipped, gloves in pockets, and backpack packed (a book, a flask, and a snack of chocolate dates), he set off, briskly.

As Alaric passed the lake and stepped into the numinous twilight of the woods, his boot stuck in an unseen rut. He cringed at the appropriateness of the metaphor and recovered his stride. Then he stopped, shocked at the National Trust sign for the forthcoming "Funy Bunny Easter Egg Hunt". Spluttering in indignation, he tripped, and this time he did fall. And fall. Down a funy hole - long and twisting - landing with a gentle thud.

His steely gaze adjusted to the crepuscular light, and Alaric realised he was at one end of a tunnel.

Everything was not quite right: the earth walls were curiously velvety, the light was cold, green, and oddly out of focus, as was the whisper of what might be wind in the trees above, and there was a sweet and soporific aroma almost, but not quite, entirely unlike the tea he had at breakfast.

There was only one way to go, so he did, though it felt like walking on treacle. As he turned a corner, Alaric saw an elliptical line of five, adult-sized Russian matryoshka dolls, spaced out, blocking the way.

The first doll was smiling broadly, but with a sinister cast emanating from ruby glass eyes. She was holding a mirrored tray bearing a handwritten card, approximately twenty Scrabble letters, and a rack for eight - yes, eight - tiles. Alaric picked up the card, glancing at his face in the mirror - then did a double-take. He slowly realised it looked odd because his reflection did not swap left for right. He looked, looked away, and looked again, but still the reflection was wrong. Unable to solve that mystery, he turned his attention to the card. The red writing said, "To pass, you must identify what sort of person can 'Mess about with part of a Roman foot'." Alaric enjoyed Scrabble, but not cryptic crosswords, and he knew little about ancient Rome. He shuffled the letters around the mirrored surface, looking for a word. An eight-letter word. Something to do with Romans: centurion, centimetre, marching maybe? DECIMATE? No, there wasn't an M. He shuffled the tiles again, and made ATTIC. Nope. Then ANTIC. Could be. But where did feet come in? And then he saw it: PEDANTIC. He put the tiles on the rack, and the doll silently shifted slightly to one side, letting him squeeze past.

The second doll had sapphire eyes and looked as big as the first. Maybe each was a separate set. Alaric considered peeking inside when he noticed her mirrored tray showed him upside down. On it, was a printed sheet, a red pen, and a card with the single word, "Correct". A statement or an instruction? Clearly the latter. The case study was full of egregious errors: misspellings, missing words, duplicated words, double negatives, unfathomable sentences stuffed with jargon, and punctuation and capitalisation that only the most charitable could describe as eccentric. And Alaric was rarely charitable in such matters. Proofreading had been an important skill throughout his twenty-year technical writing career, so he marked the corrections quickly and neatly. Without thinking why, he put the paper face down on the tray. A light briefly shone through it, there was a pause, and then a tiny gap appeared between the doll and the wall.

Problem solved, Alaric bent down to tighten his bootlaces, stood up to do the same to his belt, and then slipped past the doll, and along the tunnel.

The next doll seemed as big as the last and had glowing emerald eyes. Despite the dim light, the reflection in her tray inverted the colours, like an old photographic negative. Alaric realised the most surprising thing about this was that he wasn't very surprised, so he turned his attention to what was on the tray. There was a device that looked as if Escher had designed it while drunk, and numerous jumbled cards, each bearing a single sentence about it. Alaric flicked through them, but quickly reverted to instinct and started to investigate the buttons, rotors, switches, and menus. When he had some understanding, he looked back at the cards, and worked methodically to arrange them as a coherent sequence of instructions, testing as he went. He thought he was done, but the doll hadn't moved. He tried pushing her, but she wouldn't budge. He looked back at the cards, discarded several, swapped a pair round, and then the doll silently slid back just enough to let him through.

Despite his just having tightened them, Alaric's boots and clothes seemed even looser, and his trouser legs were trailing on the sticky dirt floor. An unsettling thought descended: the dolls didn't seem to be getting smaller - but maybe HE was?! Alaric walked cautiously towards the next one.

By now, anxiety about his situation outweighed any enjoyment from the tasks, and the fourth doll was the worst: her eyes were a cloudy mustard colour, and when Alaric peered at her tray, there was no reflection of him at all - just the tunnel wall behind. There was nothing on the tray either. Or was there?

The more he looked, the more there seemed to be the shadowy suggestion of a book, but when he put his hand out, there was nothing. He shut his eyes, reached out again, and felt something. He tightened his fingers and opened his eyes to see he was holding an iPad. Alaric confidently touched the words “Grammar Quiz”, but nothing happened. Only when he tapped the small image of a mangy cat lying in a half-open box did the virtual page turn.

“You know more - and less - than you think you do” flashed on screen for several seconds, incongruously misquoting Dr Spock.

Questions about subject/verb agreement, tenses, and apostrophes were easy for Alaric, and he separated the examples where the passive voice was fine from those where he thought it a poor choice. He took a common-sense approach to the plurals of words derived from Latin and Greek. And he didn’t fall for the implication that you could never start a sentence with a conjunction or end with a preposition.

The next item was “Hopefully, Joe won’t be fired.” Well, Joe wouldn’t be fired “in a hopeful manner”, thought Alaric, so he marked it as incorrect and typed “I hope Joe won’t be fired.” The screen didn’t change, so Alaric changed it to “He hopes Joe won’t be fired”, then “She” and “We”. The screen went black, then flashed “**Frankly**, my dear, I don’t give a damn.” Alaric was confused. Then the words changed to “**Happily**, you’ll soon understand there’s no reason for ‘hopefully’ to be a special case among adverbs.” Aha, he realised. Perhaps it wasn’t always wrong to use “hopefully” like that. He certainly saw it used that way by many respectable writers. He marked the sentence as acceptable. (He was not prepared to mark it as unequivocally correct.)

“Chris left their coat in my car” he read, and swiftly marked it as wrong. Singular “their”. That infuriating neologism, adopted to placate militant feminists and those with gender issues. Political correctness gone mad! The car owner presumably knew if Chris was male or female, and if not, there were plenty of ways to reword the sentence. They could even use the inelegant “his or her” as a last resort. THEY could... And then Alaric realised he’d used singular “they”, and in that context, it sounded fine. He grudgingly changed it to correct.

“Relax: there isn’t always a single right answer for all circumstances”, the screen reassured him.

The next page was titled “Split infinitives”. Alaric felt his hackles rise – and then fall, as he remembered something his preferred Spock didn’t say. There were several sentences. Some he rewrote to avoid the split, but a couple he left as they were because they were clearer and, yes, more elegant, with the split. The screen went white, and the doll retreated just enough to allow him past.

The final figure looked friendlier. Alaric smiled with relief at her warm opal eyes, half expecting her to smile back. Her tray reflected Alaric as it should. And on it, was a green pen, a blank sheet of paper, and a card saying, “Just write”. His mind now awash with ideas, released from the straitjacket of inappropriately applied “rules”, and more alert to the importance of context, Alaric started to do just that. As he reached the bottom of the second side, a sudden blast of air pushed him to daylight, at the edge of the woods. The paper was gone, he couldn’t see the tunnel, and his boots and belt were unbearably tight.



This story is getting too strange for my taste. I’m a hard rationalist.

I need fresh air. Tempted by the sight of the bright spring flowers puncturing the lawn, I head to the woods in pensive mood, hoping for inspiration.

I walk beside the lake, beneath the trees, when all at once I see a carpet of bluebells, tossing their heads in sprightly dance.

Nestling in a muddy rut, near the edge of the escarpment, I spy a Russian doll, her chill red eyes daring me to pick her up. I wince at my fleeting and irrational fear of an inanimate and incongruously discarded souvenir, and casually open it.

Of course, I find another doll. And another. But inside the fifth one, there is a soggy card bearing the words "Just write" in green ink, and a soggier sheet of paper.

My trembling fingers unfold it, releasing a sweet and soporific aroma. A susurrations teases my ears, as the bluebells sigh in the breeze. Things turn hazy, but I'm fine. This is the real world. I'm a hard rationalist.

But as I start to read, I feel as if I am fading from the world, like a car radio when you drive through a tunnel. My vision shimmers, my legs wobble, sounds have an underwater quality, and a sharp spring breeze snatches the paper from my weakened fingers.

As I reach out for it, the wind carries it beyond the edge, fluttering and dancing o'er vales and hills.



Alaric smiled as he headed home. In his eagerness to put fingers to keyboard, he skipped the temptation of a quick pint at The Tawny Owl. It was proving to be an unexpectedly enjoyable and creative day.