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ATLANTIS SHORT STORY CONTEST

WINNING STORY

The Best Story

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Word Count: 1.911.

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The Best Story

I started out much like any story does. Although really, that's not quite true. Elizabeth, my writer, is not as technological as most. When the idea for me began to buzz around in her head, rather than open the 'Notes' app on her phone or iPad, she sought out her notepad. And I do mean a notepad, of the paper variety. Used with a pen or pencil. She carries it in her handbag, ready for when ideas strike. She doesn't even own a smart phone. Imagine that.

Elizabeth was driving when the thought of me first distracted her. It's common knowledge that humans should avoid driving under the influence of alcohol. That's not an issue for Elizabeth. But she knows better than to drive under the influence of an evolving story. It's just not safe. So many times she's ignored the warning signs and ended up completely lost.

The day I was born, she did the only thing she could when the first labour pains of impending authorship hit her. She pulled over. No deep breathing required for this delivery. Just frantic delving through the cluttered handbag in search of the afore-mentioned notepad and the ever-elusive pen. In utter frustration, she upended the bag, spilling the contents onto the passenger seat. Finally, grabbing the pen from amongst the lipstick, shopping bags and other feminine paraphernalia, she let out the breath she had been holding and wrote.

It was a small beginning. I was hardly recognisable as a story. Like any new mother, though, Elizabeth was relieved for the moment, resting back against the headrest, content just to have me out. Growth and maturity would happen in due time.

Days passed. I was still nothing more than jottings in the notepad. Elizabeth was busy, consumed by the cares of her real world. Still, she thought about me all the time; in the shower, in the supermarket queue, and as she drifted off to sleep.

One night, out of sheer frustration, she got up in the cool, wee hours and turned her computer on. While it booted up, she boiled the kettle, hoping she wouldn't disturb the sleeping household. Gathering coffee and the precious notepad - my cradle for weeks - she opened a blank page, took a deep breath, and began to type.

And type.

And type.

The cooling coffee beside Elizabeth was ignored, as was the pink glow beginning to brighten the eastern sky.

Noises in the house finally drew her attention from me. Elizabeth's family was starting their day. All she'd done was type. She hadn't paused to reread sections, or ponder nuances of grammar. Red and green wavy lines littered my form. I felt raw, and rough, and rushed. But I was finally more than words in a notepad. I was a story. I had a beginning, a middle and something resembling an end. Most of all, I had potential. She must have felt it too. Hurriedly, Elizabeth hit the 'Save' button, naming the file 'The Best Story.'

Elizabeth didn't understand exactly where I was, but I felt safe. I delighted in the glow of my name. It set me apart from other files on the computer. From all the other stories in the world. I was 'The Best Story.' All of Elizabeth's hopes and dreams for me were encrypted in that name. I hoped I could live up to her expectations.

After the thrill of discovering my name, I enjoyed life hidden in the depths of the hard drive. But as weeks went by, I wondered how I would ever live up to my considerable title if she continued to ignore me. Elizabeth was having issues of her own. Medical appointments. Tests.

Finally, a diagnosis.

Not a good one.

On the day of Elizabeth's first treatment, there were hugs, tears and more hugs. There were assurances of love and support, and a great deal of hope expressed for a good outcome. Her family brought out a surprise. A laptop. Her teenagers had transferred everything from her old dinosaur, and set up the sleek new computer. Happy tears flowed. She now had portable technology.

And I had a new home.

Her teenagers gave Elizabeth a crash course in the basics of operating her new machine, and, too quickly, it was time to go. One last clinging hug and she headed for the car, clutching my new home like a lifeline.

With time to spare while the healing poison dripped slowly into her vein, Elizabeth settled as comfortably as possible, and opened my file. For a while, Elizabeth read, and typed and read some more. She teased and tickled me head to toe with adjustments and corrections. Before long, I sensed her attention waning. She typed a change, hit 'Undo', then 'Redo', as if she was distracted. Eventually, she noticed it too, closing my file, and the laptop.

It was months before she spent any significant time with me again. She lost an enormous amount of weight, her hair, her ability to concentrate and her sense of humour. Her appetite left as well, along with precious parts of her body. At times, she even lost her will to live.

Elizabeth's husband held her hand while she waited for surgery, held her long into the night while she cried, and held the basin into which she vomited over and over and over again.

Together they mourned the loss of body parts they had both cherished. He reassured her that nothing really changed, whispering through his tears that his love for her went so much deeper than her scars.

Her children were fantastic. Her daughter tried to entice her with favourite meals. The boys were helpful in their own dear way. When she was home, she was a pampered princess. Suddenly all the things she'd nagged them about were taken care of: dirty clothes made it to the laundry and bedrooms were kept tidy. Even their music was played at Mum-friendly volumes.

Not once did I hold her inattentiveness against her. Elizabeth's family deserved any enthusiasm she could muster. I knew she hadn't completely forgotten me. Every so often, when the house was quiet, and the drug-fog cleared for long enough, Elizabeth read me and smiled. Months of giving her such sporadic pleasure had to be enough.

I willed Elizabeth to gain strength from me. To remember the hope, the strength and the vision she revealed when she named me. I wanted her well and strong again so she could finish polishing me, and put out into the wide world of readers.

That was my heart's desire. To be read.

A year later, with a tenuous hope of continuing health, Elizabeth was once again ready to write. As flesh was added to her bones with good food, she fleshed out my skeleton with similes, soliloquies and strong verbs. After weeks of exercising together, I was feeling trim, taut and terrific. My grammar was tight, my perspective consistent. I was polished to perfection.

Elizabeth's finishing touches had worked a complete overhaul. I was a different story than the one she started over a year ago. She wrote with wisdom and depth, new qualities reflected in my

new maturity. Not that I'd suddenly become a sermon, or even a serious biography. No way. My sense of humour was intact, as was my hopeful heart.

Such ecstasy I felt at being complete – what a feeling. Like a first-day-of-school house, set to rights after the holidays by a fastidious parent after slaving all day to regain order. Or a jigsaw puzzle when the lost last piece is found and placed in position. Heavenly wholeness. Conclusive completeness.

Absolute bliss.

I revelled in being accomplished while Elizabeth searched online to find a venue worthy of me. The convoluted journey through the tangled web of the internet triggered a new idea. My name hinted at a destiny she hadn't considered. She squealed with delight and clapped her hands, like a proud parent cheering on her successful offspring. I would be entered in a short story competition.

For weeks, all Elizabeth's spare time was spent checking out deadlines, guidelines, entry fees and requirements. She revelled in technology these days. It connected her with other writers around the world. Following links down bunny trails galore, she discovered a rich network of people sharing her passion for well written words. Like a desert explorer at an oasis, she read thirstily, guzzling blogs, articles and book reviews. Finding writer's groups, on-line courses and publications seeking submissions.

It was all quite intoxicating. Elizabeth felt like a child splashing in the bubbly foam of the ocean as it licked the shore. It was fun, but she knew it was swimming that built strength and endurance, not playing around near the edge. She needed to dive in and put me out into the world of readers.

Finally, she found a competition fitting for my public debut.

But there was a problem. The required word count was less than mine.

I was too long!

The next morning Elizabeth fortified herself with coffee and sat down to begin the painful process of pruning. Repeatedly hitting the 'Delete' button was agony for us both. Elizabeth felt like she was losing much-loved members of the family. I anguished as words, and sometimes even sentences, were cut from my being and consigned to the rubbish bin. How could she do this to me?

Finally, the torment was over. I weighed in just under the assigned word count. The process had been so traumatic she turned away from me for a time. When she returned, her smile confirmed what I had suspected after the wounds of amputation healed. I was still a great story.

I still lived up to my title.

My name still spoke my destiny. Elizabeth was not a butcher after all. Instead, she was a dressmaker, transforming a wedding dress into an evening gown. I was a thing of beauty. The monarch train might be gone. There may be a few less frills and lace, but I now had a new purpose.

With great excitement, Elizabeth paid the entry fee and hit the final 'Submit' button.

Whoosh! What a ride.

I was off on the adventure of a life-time, through clouds and servers, modems and hubs, until, at last, I reached the computer of the contest co-ordinator. I was printed, clipped, and stacked with

hundreds of other stories. I was pored over by a judge, who inspected my inference, graded my grammar, and appraised my punctuation; with sighs of satisfaction and smiles of delight.

This was what I'd been created for: to please my readers. To entertain, amuse, enchant, and perhaps even impart wisdom. Two piles were made. One, the larger pile, contained stories that didn't hit the mark. Instead, they hit the basket in the corner. I counted it a blessing to be in the smaller heap, which shrunk with each reading until only a few remained.

I had been examined and found worthy.

I would be on computer screens around the world. Maybe even in print. Through me, and my companions on the short-list, busy people would be drawn back to the pleasure of reading fiction. They might even learn the power of reading to soothe the soul, eclipse their burdens for a time. To take them on journeys through space and time without them leaving their desks.

Whether I got first prize or not, doing that made me a successful story.

Maybe even the best story.