
Slush

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IN A GLIMMER of moonlight something shifted in the office. A dry, whispery sound came from the corner where the stories waited, heaped into stacks two hundred manuscripts tall. The window was closed tight, the air still. No one, not even an earwig, moved. But in the slush pile paper rustled.

* * * *

A year earlier, when Diana had announced that she was going to start her own magazine, her editor friends had overflowed with advice. She scribbled down notes as they dispensed wisdom on the merits of perfect binding, four-color covers, the pros and cons of letter columns. At the WorldCon, Jerry Kay himself, fiction editor for *Halfway to Madness* sidled up to her and said loudly into her ear, ?First

Readers.?

Diana jumped. ?Pardon me??

?Lawrence told me you're starting up a magazine of your own.?

?Yes,? said Diana. Face to face with the great editor, all her witty repartee evaporated.

Jerry wagged a fat finger at her. ?You'll need to get first readers to cope with the slush pile.?

?I have. My writer's group have offered to read the story submissions for me.? The relief of having said something coherent loosened Diana's tongue. ?That's a great T-shirt you're wearing. Thanks for the advice. I've been reading *Halfway to Madness* ever since I can remember. I loved your last book, very insightful.?

She stopped, flushed, hoping none of her friends had overheard her sucking up. But one favorable quote from Jerry could double the number of subscriptions she got.

Jerry beamed at her. ?You liked my novel??

?Yes, absolutely. It made me think about armadillos in an entirely new way.?

?Exactly! For too long people have?? Jerry stopped as one of the conference organizers came up and told him he was due on a panel in room 332. Jerry gave Diana a regretful look. ?Maybe we can meet up later to discuss my book. Oh, and I hope you'll send me a copy of your magazine when it comes out.?

* * * *

Diana lay in her bed, guilt gnawing her to wakefulness. It had seemed so simple a year ago when she decided to produce *Happenings*. She had laughed off the occasional warnings, the mutters about slush piles and the cost of paper.

A hollow thump sounded from below, from the office. Diana sat up in bed, eyes wide, picturing black-masked intruders. Slowly her heartbeat steadied. The house was quiet again. Something must have fallen over, that was all. She hadn't been in the office for a month, had found a thousand pressing reasons why she couldn't get round to the slush just yet.

Diana shivered; she turned the heater off at nights as an economy measure. But maybe she would get to sleep more easily if it were warmer. She switched on the bedside light, and padded over to the heater, the floorboards chill against her feet. She set the heater to maximum and crouched in front of it.

Now that she was out of bed, she should go downstairs and pick up a few manuscripts to read. She took a deep breath. Okay, she was going to do this, she was really going to do this. She tugged on her slippers and headed downstairs.

The office door creaked open. From the darkest corner, the piles of manuscripts seemed to lean toward her.

Diana clicked on the light. Odd how the stacks looked taller than they had in the dark, and she hadn't noticed the smaller heaps scattered beside them. She grabbed a handful of manuscripts from the stack labeled ?Recommended by Edward? and hurried back to her bed.

Under the heavy warmth of her comforter, she started the first manuscript.

Martian Revolution

by

Peter Hanson

The spaceship rocked. Oh no, thought Ensign Hanson, we
been hit bad. The whine noise meant the engines were
overheated bad. He grabbed a screwdriver from the
toolkit and went to the engine room. Sweat run down
his torso as he fought too turn the screws.

Diana groaned. She flicked to the end of the manuscript, found the yellow Post-it note with Edward's comments: ?I liked this one a lot. Its good. It has real heroes in it. If I was a space cadet, I'd be like Ensign Hanson.?

Diana read the Post-it note three times. Edward must have meant it as a joke. She thought of Edward's precise and thoughtful critiques at the writer's group meetings, how he spotted mistakes in subjects as diverse as paleontology, nineteenth century English politics, and the semiconductor industry. He had skipped the last couple of meetings, phoning to tell her he was busy catching up on the slush.

She picked up the next manuscript.

Dog Bites

by

Lydia Baxton

I want a dog. A dog that likes me like I like dogs.

Dogs have great big wet tongues. When they lick me I
am happy. They lick my cheek. They lick my toes.

There breathe smells bad, but I got used to it.

Incredulously Diana searched for Edward's comments: ?I liked this one alot. Its good. It made me think about dogs alot.?

?Very funny, Edward,? Diana whispered. Her voice was shaky. She laid the manuscripts on the bedside

table, turned out the light. She'd read enough slush for one night. For a long time she lay there in the dark, trying to reconcile Edward's behavior with what she knew of him. He was clever, quiet except when it was his turn to critique. She'd never heard him tell a joke.

The stairs creaked.

Diana curled up under the comforter: the house was old, it was bound to creak from time to time. Tomorrow she'd tackle the slush properly. At least tonight's two stories had had . . . enthusiasm. Rather like the dogs one of the authors was so keen to praise, enthusiastic to a fault. She smiled, remembering how her own dog Retro used to lick her.

Beside her something rustled.

Diana sat bolt upright, fumbling for the light.

A stack of paper swelled beside her bed, ten manuscripts wide and at least forty high. She rubbed her eyes, but the manuscripts were still there. She backed out of bed, crossed the room, yanked the door open.

The staircase was lost in a wall of paper nine feet high. Her feet skidded across a carpet of large manila return envelopes and the plaintive debris of smaller envelopes marked "Query letter?urgent." The tide of paper shifted, bulging, growing as she stood there.

She edged back into the bedroom, one hand brushing against her curtains. Through the window she saw the moonlight-etched silhouette of the tops of the pine trees. The street, the neat flower beds, the neighbor's cars were buried beneath a wasteland of paper and envelopes. Only the needled branches of the pine trees emerged incongruously from the white pages of the landscape.

Diana sat down on the bed. Her hand reached for a manuscript.

The spaceship rocked. Oh no, thought Ensign Hanson, we

been hit bad. The whine noise meant the engines were

overheated bad. He grabbed a screwdriver from the

Diana bit her lip, picturing Ensign Hanson on the shaking ship, the metallic whine of the engines measuring the dwindling hopes of the crew. She raced through the pages with an eagerness she thought she'd left behind in her adolescence.

Around her the manuscripts rustled hungrily, waiting to be read.

The End

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