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## The Problem

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## THE PROBLEM

### JASON HESCOCK

"Now what's the problem?"

"The problem is that I can't come up with a conflict," remarked Fields Stylus while messaging each of his temples with a middle finger. He was looking through the pub window at the motionless, inertia laden clouds. His friend, Gregor Gutenberg, frequently attempted to help him out of his writing slumps by 'attacking the problem head on.'

"You just have to attack the problem head on. What the hell do you mean you can't come up with a conflict? There's a million conflicts going on all the time. Just look at the world around you." He made a swooping arm gesture that, at some point in time, had become the international signal for 'the whole world.' "There's wars going on, there's criminals on the run from the law, there's a million things going on." *Fields was thinking: is 'there's criminals' a proper grammatical construction? It should be 'there are.' Do people actually use phrases like 'on the run from the law?'* "There's husbands and wives—or is it 'there are?'" Fields gave an affirmative nod. "Okay, there are people getting divorced, husbands catching their wives cheating on them, drug dealers in shootouts, and a million other crazy conflicts going on." *Is 'a million' his stock number for any large amount? It's his and a million other people's.* Gregor finished his I-know-what-I'm-talking-about-you-should-listen-to-me pontificating, and set down his pintglass authoritatively. Is he always going to set down his pintglass when making an assertion? I guess there's no reason why he wouldn't.

"I guess you're right. It does seem like there is always some type of conflict going on between people. There are lots of problems between people that oscillate back and forth until someone gains the upper-hand and then the problem is resolved." *Is it fairly obvious that he has the upper-hand right now?* "I mean, I guess, I could write a story about a girl who as a teenager becomes addicted to heroin, prostitutes herself as a means to pay for each fix, then eventually kicks the habit and becomes a successful executive at an anti-drug non-profit organization. Plus there is the heroin/heroine thing. That's kind of clever, right?" *That's really not very clever.*

24

"It's really not very clever. But you have an interesting plot right there. People love the eventual triumph theme. Look at Cinderella. People love that." *Really?* "I mean, if you look at the stories that people like they're pretty much the same." *The people or the stories?* "Most people like the same kind of stories." *That doesn't mean they're good.* "I mean, I know, it doesn't mean that the stories are good. But if you don't want to be another poor writer trying to change the face of literature you should become used to it." *This sounds like a load of bullshit to me.* "I know it sounds like a load of bullshit, but it's how

it works. Take your heroin-addicted heroine, for example." *I'm surprised he didn't say 'par exempla.'* "Or should I say 'par exempla.' Anyway, you make the reader feel sorry for her, as though it wasn't her fault that she became an addict, she fights back and forth with her addiction, and the power shifts from one to the other." *Should I try to steal the upper-hand over Gregor yet? Nah, give him a minute.* "Then the moment comes when she gets her job as an anti-drug crusader. People eat that shit up, man." Gregor finished his pontificating, and set down his pintglass authoritatively. *Does he always have to set down his pintglass authoritatively? I guess it's just in his character.*

"I get what you're saying." Fields stopped to take a drink from his pintglass; this was his customary pre-counterpoint pause. *I wonder if people notice that I always take a sip before making a counterpoint.* "But, as a counterpoint, what if my heroine never kicks her heroin addiction? Then there isn't much oscillating going on. Is there? Tell me how your triumph theme works out then." *Who's controlling the conversation now?*

"If your heroin addict never kicks her addiction, then the heroin eventually gets the upper-hand. There is still a conflict and a resolution even if it isn't what people necessarily want to hear. The protagonist doesn't always win in the end." Gregor finished his point and his drink, and then set down his pintglass authoritatively. *That's a damn good point. I'm kind of tired of him setting down his pintglass authoritatively, even if it is part of his character. Alright, focus, Fields, focus! You can't lose to him. Counterpoint—counterpoint—counterpoint.*

Fields stopped to take a drink from his pintglass. "Okay, I concede that you win that point." He takes another sip. *There must be a good counterpoint coming.* "What if the character is just an average person? I mean, I know, regular people have conflicts, but can you write a story about a guy who goes to work every day for fifty years, raises a family, has a happy marriage, and then dies at seventy-two." *Is that the average male lifespan? Nevermind, it isn't important.* "However long men live these days. The length isn't important. I mean, what am I going to do in that situation? Am I supposed to write a scene of conflict built on an awkward silence?" Fields looked at Gregor, and shrugged his shoulders. Gregor stared blankly in return. Fields waited for a reply. No reply. Gregor looked out the pub window, feigning rumination. He was hoping that Fields would start talking again. He didn't. Gregor looked over toward the bar in hopes that something would happen. It didn't. He stared intently at the table, rubbing his index finger over a nonexistent spot. He glanced up at Fields, who was still silently staring at him. Gregor turned his pintglass in half circles, and thumbed away some

condensation. Fields sat scratching his chin.

"Are you waiting for me to say something?" Gregor demanded.

"Yes. I did ask you a question."

"I thought it was rhetorical." *It sort of was.*

"Do you see my point? What's important is that people's lives don't follow your idea of tugging back and forth until someone finally gains power over the other, and then ending with a resolution to finish it all." *That's a good point, but I'm sure he has something to say in return.*

"That's a good point. But imagine how many conflicts that man must have dealt with in his seventy-two, or so, years of existence." Gregor made his point then softly set down his pintglass. *He makes a good point, but these dialogical oscillations are becoming tiresome. Besides, I don't want to admit defeat.*

"All right, I understand that it is possible to write about all of the conflicts that take place during a person's life, but it is also very possible to write about a person's life without any conflicts. Think about writing a story without any conflict. Would it become just a journal or calendar? If so, isn't life just a journal with or without entries or a calendar with or without appointments? Think about that for a couple minutes. No, I mean it. Ponder that for a few minutes while I use the restroom." Fields quickly stood. "Where is the rest room?"

"Just beyond the kitchen, on the right."

"Oh right."

Fields was using the restroom.

Fields was still using the restroom.

No one knew why it took Fields so long in the restroom.

Gregor sat fidgeting nervously. He hated the times when Fields went to the restroom and left him sitting alone. He felt so... so awkward; like he didn't belong. He tried to think about the 'alienation' thing, but still was overly

self-aware. After a while, he started wondering why Fields was gone for so long, wondering if Fields was trying to make some point. Gregor speculated that this was done intentionally because Fields knew that he would begin feeling uncomfortable if nothing was going on.

He would begin to feel like he didn't belong.

*Look at him fidgeting. A little silence, a few moments without someone to argue with, and he starts feeling out of place.* Fields sat down at the table, and began where he thought he had left off talking. "I don't understand why the seventy-two year old dead guy had to have any conflicts in his life. What if his life was smooth sailing? Why does anything have to change in his life? How often do people you know go through any big conflicts that end with resolutions? I don't see it. In fact, I think that what separates humans from other animals is the peculiarly human ability of not learning from our mistakes. What other species has the wretched skill of making the same mistake over and over again until the day they die? None! That's what I'm going to write about. My heroin addict isn't going to overcome her addiction, and become a heroine. I'm going to start with her being an addict and I'm going to end with her being an addict because that's how people live. There's no struggle of will power and resolution in people's lives. There's stubbornness and the refusal to change one's mind. Even if there is some great, abnormal moment or act of god that occurs, my character still isn't going to change her mind. I mean, Jesus could appear in the flesh to my heroin addict, and if she changes at all, even for an instant, it's only going to be a momentary flash before she plummets right back to the exact moment where she began!" *He can't argue against that. The best he'll be able to do is agree to disagree.*

"But you're writing it. You could change her if you want. Art allows for that." *Or he'll keep disagreeing.*

"Art imitates life."

"Imitates—"

"LIFE—"

"IMITATES." *This is sounding like a broken record.*

"I'm going to write a short story about a broken record that torments a genius composer, and call it 'Fields and Gregor.'" *Actually, I might.*

With a slightly annoyed, mostly tired, look, Gregor began, "Look, I was just trying to get you to change your mind slightly. But it's quite obvious that you don't want to change your thinking at all. I mean, what would it take to get you to change your mind?"

"You could pray for a *deus ex machina*." *That is one of my few quips that even I like.*

Fields sat reveling in his rare self-enjoyed witticism, as Gregor tried to unravel where the hell that last riposte came from. *I could sit and work off*

*this forever.* Fields was stroking his ego when he felt something fly sharply into his temple. "Aaaaeeooww. What the hell was that?"

Laughing, Gregor held up a small Jesus action figure: three inches tall, robed, bearded, replete with miraculous abilities as evinced by the carafe of water in his left hand and carafe of wine in his right. "Where the hell did that come from?" Fields asked.

"Him." Gregor pointed to the local eleven-year-old devil child that terrorized the pub patrons. He had jerry-rigged his Nerf 3000 Turbo Disc Shooter so that the evil, plastic machine could fire any object, even the Lord. "There's a conflict; one of millions." Gregor smiled, shaking Jesus in the face of Fields.

"How would one go about breaking a broken record?"

"Fine, don't listen. We'll agree to disagree. You don't have to give your character a conflict. He or she doesn't have to change at all if you don't want. I was just trying to help." *Is that it? Is that all he's going to say? It's just going to end like that? This doesn't seem right. It doesn't seem like much is resolved if he just gives up and allows me to stick with my same idea. I'm sure he'll have something to say.*

Looking out the window at the same motionless, inertia laden clouds, Fields sat massaging his temples with an unsatisfied look on his face.

Gregor was worried that he had not at all helped Fields come out of his writing slump.

"Now what's the problem?"