

Hemingway's Typewriter

As a child, Hal Gleason looked forward to his daily trips down the lane to the mailbox. For Hal, it was like enjoying a little of Christmas every day. Ed Jepson was the rural mail carrier for 20 years before Hal was born. From the time the boy was able to trudge the short distance to the mailbox on his own, Ed would wait there with his motor running and a big smile, as though Hal was his most important patron. "Got a package for you this mornin', Hallie," he would say and watch with delight as the child's face lit up.

Eager as he was to claim his prize, Hal never forgot his manners. "Thank you, Mr. Jepson," he would say before running home to open the package. Inside, Hal would find a secret code ring or a puzzle, or maybe a toy from an offer on the box of cornflakes. Then there were the special times when Hal would receive a letter from his grandmother, She lived just about a mile down the road. Pauline knew her only grandson loved to get letters and greeting cards. He would study the words and images, then place the card with the others lined up on the shelf in his room, displaying them like soldiers on a parade ground. Most mornings, though, there was only the newspaper or some bills. Hal would carry them in and diligently lay them on the kitchen table for his mother. As time passed, there was less mail for Hal and more for his parents.

After Hal married and moved down the road, the assortment of bills in the mailbox made his daily treks less of an adventure. Still, he enjoyed the anticipation of what could wait on the other side of that little metal lid. He would stand in the gravel road for a few moments, savoring the thought. Then he'd grasp the handle and pull the lid down to peer into the box's dark interior. To Hal, even the bills revealed something new. He never dreaded them as some did. And the newspaper with its announcements of upcoming events: a fish fry, a church picnic, the annual Strawberry Festival.

Of course, the obituaries struck a sad note. The day after Pauline died, Hal had just turned 10. He stood at the mailbox weeping, knowing that day what he would find in the little metal box. The notice of her death appeared in that day's newspaper. It was the first time he had ever seen his grandmother's name in print. The cold, formal and abbreviated obituary offended Hal. It said nothing about what a kind, loving and gracious Christian lady Pauline was. Reading it gave Hal a hollow, lost feeling. He felt empty inside. Something was gone from his life, something that could never be replaced.

The funeral was a sad affair. Hal took all the greeting cards Pauline had sent him over the years and lined them up on the table by her casket. After the service, he tucked them inside her folded arms before the casket was closed. It was only fitting that he should return them to her. Later, he stored her obituary clipping in a plastic container and placed it on the bedroom closet. Over the years it would join those of his marriage and his parents' fortieth anniversary, and then the death of his mother and father. When life seemed mundane and meaningless, he would reread the articles and reminisce about his younger years.

This early spring morning dawned bright and clear. Birdsong greeted Hal as he made his way down the lane. The scent of apple blossom in the soft air and the warm sun on his back gave him a feeling of wellbeing. He opened the mailbox with renewed anticipation. Giving in to his wife's urging, Hal had written a short manuscript based on his early life. Of course, he gave his characters' fictitious names and added a good measure of embellishment to hold the reader's interest. As a novice author, he couldn't be sure if the details were too much or too little. All in all, though, he believed his work was quite good. Missy did, too. If Hal created a grocery list, Missy would put it right up there with *Gone with the Wind*.

Having researched literary agents by the dozens, Hal selected five he believed would be most receptive and winged the manuscript off to them. Now, opening the mailbox, Hal's breath caught in his throat. Leaning against the right side of the mailbox was one of his return envelopes. He reached in and clutched it. This was the first response he had received. It felt warm in his hand and somehow spirited, as if it had a heartbeat. Hal held it to his chest. This envelope had traveled all the way to New York and back. How much would they offer him for his masterpiece? He had to force himself not to rip it open. No. He would share this joy with Missy, the one who believed in him. His step quickened as he headed in the direction of the house. Along the way he held the envelope up to the sun, but couldn't make out any figures.

Hal's smiling wife waited for him on the front porch. How fortunate he was that this beautiful woman loved him. Climbing the steps to the porch, Hal relinquished the envelope to her hand. She glanced at it and gasped. Hal grinned and nodded, watching nervously as she tore it open. The hall clock ticked off four seconds. Missy's face fell; tears gathered in the corners of her eyes. Her mouth quivered. Hal snatched it from her and stared at his carefully worded letter. Scrawled under his signature were the words, "Not for this agency." The letters blurred on the page.

"Oh, Honey, I'm so sorry," Missy said, her tears spilling over.

Hal took her in his arms and stroked her hair. "Don't worry. It's all right," he said with more conviction than he felt. "It's only the first one. Just toss it. I'll be out in the shed working on the lawn mower." And work on it he did, after the tears stopped. He felt like someone had kicked him in the teeth, but he kept his misery private. The following day another rejection letter arrived. For the next several months, Hal gave up writing and went back to being a reader.

He loved to read. Losing himself in a book was always one of his greatest pleasures. As a boy of six he discovered the wonderful world of books. Not that he wasn't aware of them before, he just never considered the source of the stories his mother read to him each night. Afterward, he dreamed of himself as the knight fighting giants or dragons.

As the years passed, so did Hal's taste in reading. In his teens he savored the classics by Poe, Fitzgerald, Hemingway and others. Propped up in bed at night, he became part of the adventures of well-known and unknown authors. He came a crossed typographical or a grammatical error even in the best. However, these minor flaws never deterred him from enjoying the novel. Still, often after he finished a book, he would tell Missy, "I could write a book as good as this, even better."

Missy believed that too and encouraged him. “Honey, with your love of books, I think you would make a great writer,” she said one morning at breakfast.

“Nah, nobody would want to read my writing,” Hal protested, grinning across the table at her. Then his face fell. “I tried that once—remember? — and once was enough.” However, the seed was firmly planted in his mind. Over the next few years, it continued to grow. On Hal’s thirty-fifth birthday, Missy presented him with a book about writers and how they got their starts. Hal sat up half the night reading it. Some were younger, some older. However, they all had persevered over the risk of putting pen to paper. Hal understood that writing a book was a difficult undertaking. He knew full well that the first draft would be jumbled and messy, and that he must write and rewrite it several times over to make it worthy of a following.

One evening in mid-winter, Hal decided the time had come to try his hand at writing again. Sitting down at his computer, he pulled up a blank document and stared at the flashing cursor. He typed a few words, thought for a while, and typed some more. To his amazement, momentum materialized out of nowhere. As he kept typing, the story flowed through him. Outside, the wind howled around the house. Swirling snow pecked at the window. Just as with the novels Hal had read, he became lost in the story.

The girl—a young woman, really — lost in the Northwest wilderness. Fresh from urban Illinois, she had no hint of survival tactics. Having escaped from an abusive situation, she traveled west alone. She began her journey in the fall, with no money and little in the way of provisions.

Hal floundered a bit as he thought about his story and tried to work through the difficulties. What year was it? What dangers did she face? How could she survive? Oddly, he drew a parallel between his character’s predicament and his job at the steering wheel factory. It had taken Hal five long years to prove himself capable and worthy of his current title of assistant manager. A different type of survival, to be sure, but the need for toughness, stamina and determination was the same. He plunged ahead.

The woman stumbled upon an abandoned cabin. She cleaned it out and, although dangerous and foolhardy, climbed up on the leaking roof to repair it. By the time she finished, the weather was turning bitterly cold. She struggled to find provisions and gather enough firewood to last through the winter.

Amazingly, as Hal wrote, he actually felt the chill of the howling wind. Only when Missy called him to dinner did he realize he was famished. Lying in bed that night, the budding storyteller was sure he heard the woman weeping. Impossibly, his character had become real to him. It wouldn’t surprise him if she knocked on his front door. He couldn’t wait to return to the computer and create more challenges for her to conquer.

He finished the first draft. Reading it embarrassed him. He went over it slowly, chapter by chapter. He was never good at grammar. His high school English grades were barely passing. Now he wished he had paid more attention to his subjects and less to girls. He reread the manuscript and worked on it some more. He read it aloud, making changes where the story lagged or seemed thin.

Finally, one evening he reached the end, The next morning Hal asked Missy to read the manuscript while he was at work. Curiosity daunted him throughout his shift, but he dared not call her. He was afraid to know what she thought of his ramblings, yet he couldn't wait to hear. What if it was awful? What if she hated it but didn't want to hurt his feelings? He had studied other authors' lives. They were great writers who struggled to make their voices known. Take Melville, for instance. During his lifetime, he sold only 50 copies of *Moby Dick*. Hal refused to allow himself to become discouraged and quit.

His shift over, he hurried home, only to hesitate at the kitchen door. Taking a deep breath, he pushed it open. Missy greeted him with red-rimmed eyes. She threw her arms around him and bawled. Good or bad? Hal couldn't tell. Leaning back, Missy looked him in the eyes. His heart pounded. She was trying to find a way to gently tell him how bad his story was. Swallowing the lump in his throat, he asked, "So?"

"I started reading right after you left." Stepping to the sink, Missy filled a glass with water, took a sip and sat down at the table. Hal dropped into the chair opposite her. "I thought I would read a little and then wash the breakfast dishes and vacuum the living room. But, Honey, I couldn't put it down! It was like I was right there with her. When that creep punched her, I could almost feel the blow. When I read how thirsty she was, I had to stop and get a drink. I felt her fear when she was wandering around the forest. The next thing I knew, it was noon!"

"So you're saying it's good?"

"Not good. excellent, It's the best book I ever read. But..."

"But what?"

"You've got to have it edited. Your grammar is terrible." She laid a hand on his arm. Tears were in her eyes again. "Dear, just think, if your manuscript is this good, how much better will it be if you have it edited?"

Hal threw back his head and laughed. "You and my English teacher. He would definitely second that!" Missy threw her arms around his neck and hugged him tightly. Throughout the evening, they chuckled about his grammar.

Lying in bed wide awake, Hal mused about his book being published and prominently displayed on bookstore shelves, about being sought for TV and radio interviews, perhaps winning the Pulitzer Prize. It was nearly two before he drifted off.

Rising early the next morning, Hal searched the internet for fiction book editors. Their prices made him suck in his breath. He sent emails to two of the least expensive. One of them claimed on her website to be the editor for a bestselling author who she refused to name. The second charged by the word. Their replies came quickly. The first told him her fee would be between \$1,200 and \$1,500; the second was asking \$2,200. Hal's heart sank.

He grappled with the editing dilemma for a month, searching website after website. He emailed more editors, hoping to find just one whose qualifications were greater than their fee. You're chasing your tail, he chided himself. It made him wonder. How strongly do I believe in my writing? In the book? Is it worth pursuing or should I just let it die?

One thing Hal knew: He felt a kinship with his main character. The struggle she went through to survive matched his fight to keep his book alive. There was one solution, although it would take time. Hal began taking his lunch to work instead of eating in the cafeteria. He cut back on extras like candy bars and donuts. He lost weight. He started running in the evenings; it seemed to clear his head. After a vigorous run, he would take a quick shower and sit down at his desk. Sometimes he wrote for an hour, other times less, but he was always productive.

Hal started a new book and seemed to labor less with it than he had the first. The first was his baby, though, and he was bent on getting it in front of the public. He sent out a dozen more email queries to literary agents, ten of whom came back with refusals so quickly Hal knew they couldn't have read the entire manuscript. The other two lagged behind, but were no less deflating. One didn't bother to send a rejection form, merely replying with, "Not for us." Hal wouldn't give up. Over the next month he averaged two to three rejections a day. He kept them all, his count nearing 100. In the beginning, he had bragged to his coworkers about the book and his aspirations for it. Now, as the months passed, he cringed when asked about it. He avoided people and their questions. If cornered, he'd just smile and say it was coming along.

He scoured YouTube, and other sites, trying to learn how to attract an agent. Surely there was someone out there who would see value in his writing. He discounted the myriad of online ads stressing the benefits of self-publishing, believing only those who couldn't qualify for a real publisher would choose that route.

One afternoon Ava Sanchez approached Hal after work. "Hey, you still writing?"

"Uh, yeah, some," he answered as dismissively as he dared without seeming rude.

"Yeah? Listen, my cousin came across something you might be interested in."

"What's that?" he asked, not really wanting to know.

Ava leaned over and whispered, "Hemingway's typewriter."

Hal couldn't help but smirk. "You're kidding, right? Isn't that supposed to be in a museum or something?"

"That's what I thought. My cousin says somebody replaced the real one with a fake and smuggled it out. Inside job, I guess."

Hal turned back from unlocking his car. He thought of the poem, *The Night Before Christmas*. Sugarplums may have been skittering in those kids' heads, but books with "Hal Gleason" in big letters on the cover were dancing around in his. "Well, I don't know, I might be interested."

What's he asking for it?" Hal stumbled over his words a bit; feigning casualness never came easily to him.

"Twelve hundred. But I could probably talk him into taking less."

"I can't afford that. I've been saving for months just to pay for an editor." He wanted to tell her to forget the whole thing.

"Yeah but, if you had Hemingway's typewriter why would you need an editor?" Ava grinned, waved and walked away.

All the way home and throughout the evening, Ava's words kept pounding the inside of Hal's head. In bed, he leaned over and kissed the slumbering Missy, then lay awake staring at the ceiling. He hadn't told her about Ava's cousin's offer. Hal's thoughts were jumbled, but one kept pushing through: The last person to touch those keys was the great man himself. True, Hal would never write books with a style to match Hemingway's. Still, having that typewriter could bring him such inspiration, so much motivation... He drifted off.

A handsome man with a trim physique and thick, dark hair and mustache handed Hal his typewriter and admonished, "Take good care of it, son. If you do, you'll be at the top of the bestseller list in no time."

Hal woke the next morning with Hemingway's words still ringing in his ears.

At 9 AM he went to his tiny office and phoned Ava. Speaking in low tones, he agreed to meet Ava's cousin at his home.

"Who were you talking to?" Missy's voice came from behind, startling him.

"I... ah... Oh, wrong number," Hal said, his face flushing. Why did he feel the need to lie to her? They had always shared everything. From the beginning, they promised each other there would be no secrets in their marriage. Besides, Hal was too much of an open book to pull off lies or deception. Even as a child, his mother always knew if he was being less than honest. Missy gave him an odd look, but said nothing and left the room.

Hal glanced at the clock. There was time to kill before the meeting. He paced around his office while mentally picturing his fingers flying across Hemingway's keyboard. Minutes later, Missy was in the doorway, looking puzzled and a little annoyed. "Okay, do you want to tell me what's going on?" He told her. She wanted to shake him to his senses, but she was wise enough to know Hal needed something to boost his confidence. If a hunk of metal could do it, the price would be cheap.

The petulant look on Hal's face made Missy think of a little boy being denied his favorite toy. She smiled. "Why don't you call Ava and tell her we'll be a few minutes late?"

"We?"

Missy may have not believed the typewriter malarkey, but she believed in her husband. “Yes. If it is Hemingway’s typewriter, they’ll want to keep the transaction quiet. They’ll want cash. So we will have to go to the bank.” She handed him his phone. He grabbed her and kissed her.

Hal stared into the open trunk of Ava’s cousin’s 15-year-old Chevy. Hemingway’s typewriter sat atop a pile of what looked like flea market rejects. It was nothing like Hal had envisioned. It was dull and dingy, the letters on the keys worn and some type bars stuck together. “You really expect to get twelve hundred bucks for that?” Hal asked querulously.

Frowning, Ava’s cousin reached to close the lid, clipping Hal’s nose as he did. “You don’t want?” he snapped with a heavy Spanish accent. “Fine. I got other buyer.”

“Okay, wait,” Hal said. “What’s your bottom dollar?” He crossed his arms, tucking his clammy palms against his chest “I take a thousand, that’s it.” he pushed the trunk lid halfway down.”

Hal hesitated. Missy spoke up. “I have eight hundred here.” She fanned the eight bills and waved them in the air.

“Nine hundred,” Ava’s cousin said.

“Eight-fifty,” Missy countered.

“Done.” The man grinned at her and opened the trunk.

Hal was quiet on the way home. Missy left him alone with his thoughts. Once parked in their driveway, he opened the trunk and tenderly retrieved the typewriter. “Do you think it really was his?” he asked.

It’s a little late to ask that, Missy thought. “Honey, it’s what you believe that matters,” she answered as she headed toward the front door.

“I’m going to see if I can clean it up.”

“Okay, hon. I’ll bring you your lunch.” She flashed him a smile.

“Thank you, my love.” Hal kissed her and headed off to the garage. For the next couple of hours, he worked to restore the relic, first with a paintbrush dipped in soapy water, then solvent, then buffing until it shined like new. To his delight, the stuck type bars loosened and engaged easily when he tapped the keys. Lastly, he removed the ribbon, noting the numbers on the spool.

When he had done all he could, Hal reverently carried the typewriter into his office. He cleared a space on the desk and set it down, then stood back and studied it. Old and outdated as it was, Hal had seen plenty of others just like it. Yet there was something different. He could picture Hemingway hunched over it, bringing *The Old Man and the Sea* to life. Could this typewriter coax out of Hal anything near as masterful?

Missy carried in a tray holding a slice of pie and a cup of coffee for him. “Okay, Mr. Hemingway, write me a book to set the world on fire.”

Hal grinned. “Soon as I get a new ribbon.”

“I love you. I know your book will be as great as Hemingway’s.” She set down the tray and kissed him.

Hal found his ribbon on Amazon, two-pack for only a little over \$10. When it arrived, he carefully threaded it into the machine. As she prepared dinner, Missy listened to the gratifying click-clack of his typing. As they ate, Hal announced, “I’m going to grow a mustache.”

“Oh... really? I think you’ll look very dashing,” Missy stammered, wondering how far this would go.

Over the next few weeks, Hal spent every spare minute typing. He’d respond with a growl if interrupted. Up at five, he would put on coffee and immediately begin typing. At the far end of the house, Missy lay in bed listening, her eyes moist. She was losing her husband and didn’t know how to stop it. Every evening Hal would return from work and within ten minutes sequester himself in his office to work on the manuscript. He barely left that room to eat or sleep.

Hal spent less and less time with Missy. They had talked about having a baby this year, but she doubted that would happen now. Hal came to bed late and rose early. The less sleep he got, the crankier he became. Missy began to avoid him. She washed his clothes, made his meals and quit asking about the book. The bond between them began to dissolve. Hal’s cold, distant demeanor was frightening to her. Her heart cried out to him. She wanted to help him to turn things around, but she no longer felt she could talk to him.

One morning, several weeks after they bought the typewriter, Hal came out of his office to leave for work. He laid the manuscript in Missy’s lap and left without kissing her goodbye or uttering a word. Sitting down with her coffee, Missy began to read. She didn’t get beyond the first page and barely made it to the sink to spit out her mouthful of coffee before choking on it. Maybe she misread it. Returning to her chair, she picked up the manuscript. There was no mistaking it. What Hal had written over the last three weeks was a pitifully poor imitation of *The Old Man and the Sea*. Forgetting the plagiarism, misspelled words galore and meandering sentences throughout, Hal had tried to make the story his own.

Before, Missy had wept for joy over Hal’s writing; now she sobbed with despair. How could she tell the man she loved his writing was terrible? If he submitted it to publishers, they would laugh at him? All day she watched the clock. She made lunch but didn’t touch it. She avoided looking at the manuscript lying on the kitchen chair where she left it. Time seemed to drag. She cleaned the house just to have something to do. Worried all afternoon about what she would say to him. She knew he’d be crushed to hear that his writing was trash.

What he wrote before, what came from his own heart and mind, this was nothing but a horrible knockoff. Was she supposed to lie? The clock crawled and flew at the same time.

Anxiety followed her into the bedroom. She pulled out her underwear drawer, placed it on the bed and started straightening, tossing a few frayed pieces into the wastebasket. The silence was comforting, but her thoughts continued to race. She heard the kitchen door open and close. It was only four o'clock. Hal wouldn't be home until five. Missy's heart leapt into her throat. She always kept the doors locked when she was home alone. In her distress over the manuscript, had she forgotten?

She heard her husband's voice. "Missy?" He was coming down the hallway.

"Here," she answered weakly.

Hal stepped into the room and leaned against the dresser. He looked intently at her. "What did you think?"

"You're home early," Missy said, avoiding his eyes.

"Yeah, I worked through lunch." Hal crossed the room and sat on the bed next to her. She tensed. He didn't seem to notice. He put his arm around her waist and flashed a confident smile. "Couldn't put it down, could you? Finished it in one sitting?"

"Oh, Hal." Missy's voice caught in her throat; tears ran down her cheeks. "How could you? What you wrote before was so beautiful, so... you. What you handed me this morning is nothing but a poor imitation of *The Old Man and the Sea*. Worse than bad. Pathetic."

Hal's smile collapsed. A look of disbelief crossed his face. He pushed off the bed and stood with his back to her. "What do you know, Missy? You're not a writer," he said, biting off each word.

"No, I'm not," she said sorrowfully. "I'm a reader."

"There were parts he messed up. I fixed them," Hal argued, his face flaming.

"Hal, sweetheart, *The Old Man and the Sea* won the Pulitzer Prize. Some say it was his best work. How could you, or anybody, improve it?" Missy moved toward him, wanting him to take her in his arms. She prayed he would come to his senses.

Backing away, he held up his hands, palms out. Turning, he stomped down the hallway. The door to his office slammed. A short time later, Missy quietly passed by the room. His muffled sobs brought tears to her eyes. She longed to take him in her arms and comfort him as she would a little boy who had skinned his knee. But Hal wasn't a child. He would have to work through this by himself.

Two hours later, she knocked on the door. "Dinner's ready, Honey." No answer. "I'll be waiting for you." She took her seat at the table, folding her hands in her lap and biting her tongue. The food was getting cold. She heard the door to the office open. Hal sat down across from her, his eyes red-rimmed. For the first time in their marriage, he didn't pray over the meal. Missy bowed

her head and prayed silently. Dinner passed without a word. Finishing, Hal carried his plate to the sink and went back to his office, leaving his wife to sit there alone.

Missy spent the evening in front of the TV, seeing and hearing nothing. At ten, she curled up in bed with a novel she bought the day before. Her mind kept wandering to Hal. Why did she agree to purchase that typewriter? Around midnight she stirred to the sound of typing. Drifting in and out of sleep, it seemed the Lord was speaking to her, assuring her everything would be all right. At four AM, she felt the bed sag and soon heard soft snoring. Missy closed her eyes and prayed.

She awoke to the sound of typing and sunlight streaming through the open window. It was eight o'clock. She never slept this late. The smell of coffee wafted to her nose. Tying her robe around her, she started toward the kitchen. The door to Hal's office was open. Seeing her, he stopped typing. "Good, you're up. Get some coffee and read those pages I left on the table. Please." He smiled. Tired lines creased his face. His eyes were bright, but bloodshot from lack of sleep.

Missy sat down and scooped up the sheaf of typed pages with trepidation, began reading. Half-way down the first page, she was spellbound. Thirty minutes later, she turned over the last page and laid it on the pile. Missy dabbed at her eyes and breathed a heavy sigh of relief. The story of the woman in the woods was good, better than good. It was triumphant. The grammar would make an English teacher run screaming, but the story was riveting and written with a flair unlike any Hal had shown before.

"Well?" Hal asked as he came up behind her. He placed his hands gently on her shoulders and kissed the top of her head. "What do you think?"

Her eyes moist, Missy looked into Hal's face. "It's the best story I've ever read." Her voice was a whisper, but her genuineness was unmistakable. "Better than anything Hemingway ever wrote."

Hal laughed. "Oh, and you're not just a little prejudiced."

Missy stood and wrapped her arms around her husband. "We're going to the bank for a loan. You're going to publish this."

Hal smiled. "For once, I'm way ahead of you. I took a break from writing last night and searched the internet. We can have the book published by Amazon for free, and they'll distribute it all over the world."

"That's wonderful, Honey, but you still have to do something about your grammar."

"I took care of that, too, my love. Remember Mr. Bruno, high school English? I messaged him on Facebook and asked if he knew of anyone. Turns out he's been doing editing work ever since he retired ten years ago. He was shocked to hear from me, and even more so when I told him I'd written a book." Hal returned Missy's grin with a wink. "And he only charges a small percentage of the profits, which I think is very fair."

This proved to be a wonderful decision for all involved. As for Hemingway's typewriter, it took up permanent residence on a shelf in the garage. That was a smart move, too.

Note from the author

Hal is like many of us. Afraid to venture out on our own, we want to piggyback on some else's success. However, we find this impossible. It is only in going out on our own that we find our voice. Each one of us must find our way in writing, painting speaking and living. If we copy someone else, we risk being nothing more than a cheap imitation.