

Unwanted Stories: A Public Service Advisory

by Gita M. Smith

For a long time, I was just like you.

I didn't know where to put the unfinished stories that I no longer liked. When I threw them into the trash, they knew I had no intention of coming back later, of finishing and polishing them. They would whine and snivel and shout insults from the garbage can all the way to the dumpster, in fact.

“You have no discipline!”

“Don't kill your darlings!”

“You never had any talent, you hack!”

“Wait! Please! The implausible plot twist is fixable. Really!”

Some of the stories were abysmal, even in second drafts. For example, I wrote 4,000 words about a cable channel that only showed re-runs, 24 hours a day, and its call letters were WRER (RER for re-runs, get it?)

Or, the story about a soft-hearted owner of a combination laundromat and liquor store and the regulars who washed their clothes at midnight. They were all shift workers who couldn't do laundry during the daytime, so they piled in at night and drank copious amounts of beer and partied while their clothes went round and round. I had trouble keeping track of all the customers, and I couldn't settle on a name for the soft-hearted owner: Louie or Lou. Or something.

And now some words of caution: Disposing of failed short stories only SEEMS easier on a computer because you can just hit DEL and they're gone from a folder. But you must be mindful of your hard drive and the many places where documents and copies can hide. After deleting the television rerun story, the bastard popped back up as an attachment in an email to my *agent*.

It wanted to be read by a professional. *It* wanted a second opinion.

“Fuck OFF!” I screamed at my screen. “You have no life apart from me. I made you and I will destroy you!” This set off the family dog, and everyone came running to witness my outburst.

If you try to placate unfinished stories by putting them aside with their corners neatly lined up, perhaps in an attractive box, they will behave for a while. They think you are just straightening up your desk and that you are coming back soon, as if you'd stepped out for a quart of milk and the morning newspaper.

Then one of the stories — *usually the one with real character development issues* — wises up and starts complaining.

“Hey. Hey, what about me? Hey, are you there? We have work to do here. You can't leave the vicar alone with the widow and the wine! Temptations of the flesh!”

No, unfinished, deeply flawed stories require the kind of handling you see in movies where a Virus That Will Doom Mankind has to be disposed of by scientists wearing hazmat suits.

First, cleanse your computer of all vestigial copies.

Next, throw the paper drafts (and scribbled notes) into a fire. And I mean a hot fire, not a sissy-baby fire. When the pages have burned down to ash, carefully shovel the ashes into leak-proof garbage bags.

Drive to the city dump where you leave them. And yes, the dump is appalling and yes, those are seagulls even though you live a thousand miles from any ocean.

Drive home, and begin again, writing carefully this time and joyously.

