

The Writer as Rapist

by Bonnie ZoBell

She's at an artist colony in the state of Virginia. She's in her studio. She should be writing. That's what everybody thinks she's doing out here. Why else would she be in her studio alone at 3:00 a.m.?

But there's an interloper. A new painter? Sculptor? Maybe he translates French poetry or struggles with the great American symphony. She aches, not wanting to move even a centimeter, make one iota of noise, so she won't miss a single chirp from who this is she's spending time with. Every rustling of her neoprene jacket, every incursion of rubber sole crashing down on fresh snow, echoes. Utterings cast through the artist compound and her mind, banging down the long hallway to her studio and the one on the way to her frontal lobes, making it harder to coax the art into the world.

Normally, alone writing in a room, she'll cast her arms vehemently towards the ceiling like her angry character might to test how explosive he really is. Channeling him is a strain. He's outraged confronting his business partner of nine years, his best friend from college, his own wife being bonked by this man. Next she concentrates on feeling sorrow, her lips and eyes drooping when one of the adoptive sisters has to be taken away from the other. Then there's the middle-aged woman who doesn't feel she can continue. Is this enough to warrant being in a writers' studio? Every night has been tranquil when she works after dinner, when the other fellows give up and go to bed, or if they work, it's over by 9:00 p.m.

But tonight here is the interloper. He uses the restroom at 12:30 a.m. and at 2:00 a.m. He leaves the seat up.

She doubts he's a burglar. There's nothing to steal in the studios but years' worth of artists' signatures, scrawled musical notes on top of baby grands that no one can move anyway, cheap writers' laptops outdated the minute they reached Best Buy's parking lot.

He can't be a rapist or he wouldn't leave his DNA on the toilet seat or drop so many hairs easily vacuumed up by forensic scientists. Unless he's new and hasn't watched enough crime TV.

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She doesn't see rapists as big showerers. They want secrecy to spy on a girl, dwell on briefly controlling every aspect of her life. He doesn't stick around artist residencies to witness the woman's emotional fallout. Otherwise he'd go on dates instead.

Whether rapist or ceramicist, this interloper will stumble into the shared shower, apply feminine soaps and lotions, and appreciate the smells of women in their bathrooms without their ever knowing. Whether stalker or filmmaker, if he could he'd peer into their windows and see what they do in private.

But this intruder is a writer, she knows it, a far better writer than she is-willing to write about lives of far more consequence than the every day people she studies. When he stays late out in the barn studios, it's because he's writing about boys who have AIDS, African presidents locked into damp cells for twenty-nine years whose minds still function when they get out, men in Iraq who shoot themselves because they can't bear another minute.

Sitting in her studio too late sometimes puts her on edge. What if she can't think of anything else to say? Why isn't she out building roads? Why can't she let Bill off easy? He could accept his wife Hella's affair, believe her when she says it's over, instead of having to find her one night with his business partner in the laundry room bent over the dryer. Rather than separating the adoptive sisters, why doesn't she put little Alexa and little Susan into the same family, one that doesn't practice such arcane religious acts? The middle-aged woman who can't stop ideating about suicide could suddenly discover France, or exercise, or other women.

She hopes that while the interloper is writing his award-winning prose he also provides therapy for his character returning from Baghdad. This soldier can't connect with anyone who hasn't seen a head blown off, a three-month old baby chopped from its mother's arms. Neither he nor his men can stop cleaning their guns over and over and over again.

The later the interloper stays out in his studio, the more important his work. It doesn't take him a half an hour to change the commas and periods in a paragraph. He'll be just a little too thin

because he's so deeply committed to his work he doesn't eat right. He'll have just the right amount of hair on his chest. His derriere won't sag but will plump out nicely once she feeds him. It will be a friendly derriere once it gets to know her. She will have pet names for it.

In the barn shower, he will imagine the feminine heads from which the brown, blond, and gray hairs have sprung. While washing, he invents them-painter women whose drips drop only on the feminine sways of their bodies and who imagine artistic ways to make love. The composer who sings to him in such an eerie cadence that he wants to hear it for the rest of his life. The collagist appreciates every single component of his anatomy, addresses each individually, until finally she has completed the whole. The poet writes odes, building him up, making him feel grand, until she has her way with him. Afterward, the intruder has to stay in the shower longer to clean up the aftermath of his lovemaking. Maybe that's what he does in his room, too. In a sense, isn't that what they are all doing-pleasing themselves?

She goes to bed early. She thinks about him still working out there. When she awakes early in the morning, she'll walk out there and find him, no matter who he is. She may not even knock before going in. .

