

Golden Red

I looked up for a moment to see that even though an eternity had passed from the last time I'd looked at the clock, only three minutes had gone by. The teacher at the head of the classroom droned on about Georgian style homes, while the girls in front of me whispered about their last dance team practice. I rolled my eyes and continued to doodle in my notebook. Creative Writing was the class I was supposed to be taking but the lovely ladies at the academic counselor's office decided what I meant by that was Interior Design. Not only was the class completely irrelevant to me because I had no desire whatsoever to be an interior designer, but the class was populated with people who were either on dance team or on one of the four cheerleading squads my high school had. Unfortunately I was one of the "art" kids, which is even weirder to think about considering I had never taken an art class. By definition, I don't know anyone in that group. Never the twain shall meet. They do, and it's uncomfortable for both parties.

But it was a good time to doodle. I spent most of my days doodling and writing down little lines for books or short stories that didn't have an owner. I can't bear to throw away a notebook because who knows what gem I've written down while in this trancelike state where I can close my ears to the world and open them to my own.

"And then, Jenna was like, 'Omigod, I can't believe you just did that!' It was totally funny." The blonde cheerleader who sat directly in front of me finished her story. She saw me make a face and lowered her voice because now it was time to talk about the one weird kid who stuck out like a sore thumb in the class.

I wanted to stand up and just leave. Announce that I'm going and that I'm never coming back because this class is the most bullshit 'A' I've ever gotten and frankly if I have to hear the teacher call them 'pillas' in her thick Texan accent one more time instead of 'pillows' which is how it's actually pronounced, I'll drive my own pen through my eyeball. Why did I have to sit here? Why did I have to go to class? Why did I have to endure seeing people talk about me but not respond because that's just one of the social rules? Why? Why? Why?

Why did such stupid things matter to these people? Didn't they see the bigger picture? The bigger world? I wanted to open everyone's eyes through sheer force of will but how could I? My hand was moving and when I realized that, I looked down.

In large, angry letters I'd written a Latin phrase.

Memento mori. Remember that you will die.

The words seemed to pulse and it was that very moment when I realized that I did have the power to show people what it was I felt, what it was that I was thinking. This is how I would tell them.

But first, I need to backtrack a little. You see, I wish that's when I gave birth to the idea, at sixteen, with just a cool Latin phrase and nowhere to go because it would be a lie. *Golden Red*, my novel, had in fact taken root when I was twelve years old.

Of course, it didn't have a real message. I just wanted to make my main female character, the bad tempered violent anti-social Leanna Carrington and my main male character, the much more mellow, generally well-liked Peter Gallows fall in love. Whenever I tried to write that story, it fell apart after a few paragraphs. I just got sick of it. So they went to a boarding school. So what? It needed something. But what?

When I was a freshmen in high school, I read *Fahrenheit 451* for the first time. I'd read *Animal Farm* but I'd only been eight and therefore too young to know the phrase 'dystopia' so I consider *Fahrenheit 451* my eye-opener. It was brilliant. It was beautiful. It made people think and it was a message that would survive because it was the sort of thing that could never die. Immediately after, I wanted another and someone suggested I read *A Clockwork Orange*. I remember finishing that and thinking, "I'm going to write something like that!"

I still have no idea what I meant by that phrase but I think I wanted to write something that would make Anthony Burgess and Ray Bradbury proud. I thought about Peter and Leanna, my two characters with no real story but I wasn't sure how they were going to fit into this. Conformity is a big theme in dystopian novels. There's lots of conformity about boarding schools. But now what? They couldn't be the only people...

Sometimes, people ask questions like, "Do you believe in fate?" and for me, it's very hard to say no. Faced with the problem of needing more characters, I fell asleep and dreamed of St. Gabriel's, yes, now it had a name because the dream gave it to me, and two roommates: Andy Garotte and Winter Thornton. It's odd to think about it now because in the dream they were very different from the characters I ended up with by the same name. Like shadows of what a person could be. Andy swore a lot in my dream. Winter was extremely feisty. The two spent the entire dream arguing, even though it was obvious they were in love.

I had four characters. I had a location. And what exactly was going to be the deep, dark, scary secret of this school? I thought about people for a long time and what people want and even what Albus Dumbledore said, "The trouble is, humans do have a knack of

choosing precisely those things that are worst for them.” People want to control their destinies, even angry teenagers such as I. How do you control the world completely and make things really work the way you want them to? The answer came to me in the shower, the source of all inspiration. It never fails. Thinking hard about a problem I’m having with a book. Epiphany. Shampoo in eyes.

You could if you made God.

I could suddenly see my villain. A tall, imposing, well-dressed man with long hair he always kept back in a ponytail. A man who was disappointed with the people around him and all the mistakes, in his eyes, that they made. A man who wanted to be one with God. A mad scientist who would perform a horrible experiment to student after student, opening minds to eternity, to true eternity.

Now I had a story.

I sat down to write it, extremely pleased with myself. This was going to be great! I finished thirty pages of it and sent it to my older sister to read. When she finished, I sat beaming, waiting for the praise and adoration to flow from her mouth.

“It made my head hurt.” She grimaced. I couldn’t see her because I was on the phone but I could hear it on his voice.

“What do you mean?” I asked her. Maybe it was just so deep that she couldn’t understand how deep it was?! Had I blown her mind?

“It just doesn’t make sense and the characters are really stupid. Andy swears constantly. But he goes to this fancy elite boarding school. That seems kind of weird.” She told me before proceeding to rip it all to shreds. When she was finished, I was left a

sobbing mess. She was a hundred percent right and I'd been wearing such thick rose-colored glasses that it hadn't even sunk in.

I put it away. I was afraid to go near it. Maybe it just wasn't a good idea. Of course, you can't put stuff like that away. It would leak in whenever I was caught off guard and I wondered if there was anyway to fix it. The characters weren't whole characters. What was missing? Why couldn't I make Winter and Andy work?

I reread one of their arguments. I noticed something odd. I deleted their names from the prose and re-read the conversation. I had no idea which one was talking. I'd made them the same exact character. Back to the drawing board. Okay, what if Winter was a total introvert? Not anti-social like Leanna, just extremely shy? And Andy was always the most popular guy in school, so his character needed to be tweaked. No swearing. Still a mischievous little devil though.

I turned sixteen. *Memento mori* hit me like a ton of bricks.

The characters still weren't whole. They were missing something. I wrote down that they were like people without shadows. That struck me. Shadows. The parts of themselves they didn't want anyone to see. Leanna wouldn't want anyone to know that she probably did desire friends or to be close to others. Peter wouldn't want anyone to know that he had thoughts that wouldn't be considered normal. Andy wouldn't want anyone to know about his past or his motivations. And Winter wouldn't want anyone to know that the sweet, quiet girl was actually an angry young woman. I would give their shadows a home in a world beneath the school, a world called 'The Underground'. Some last minute touches were added. Leanna's penchant for hallucinogenic drugs; Winter

always taking an hour to get to her dorm room after classes ended; Andy's mysterious painting; and Peter's undercurrent of uneasiness.

I bravely sat down and wrote the first chapter. I sent it to my sister. When she said she was finished, I winced like someone seeing a fist being drawn back.

"It's a work of art." My sister told me. "I love it! I can't wait to see what happens next!"

She...liked it? I couldn't even believe it. I was like a possessed person. I began writing on it constantly until at least I'd finished the final scene. I'd like to say it all flowed perfectly but that would be terribly untrue. I'd yell at characters, whole scenes would go in a total different direction that I'd originally planned them. A drug scene at the beginning of the book, involving Leanna hallucinating running along the back of an endless caterpillar, which was based on a nightmare I had, turned into a metaphor that completely ran away from me. Other people asked me how I planned it. I didn't. They just wouldn't stop talking about butterflies and caterpillars. Characters are their own people and you have no control over them whatsoever. "When did you get a back story?" "Um, I always had one, duh." One character appeared out of nowhere to cause trouble. He was so insidiously evil that every time I wrote his lines, I found myself gagging. Amazingly, he was the easiest character to write.

When I finished, I was so elated that I ran around my house telling everyone. My dad rolled his eyes at me. My little brother sort of shrugged. My sister was extremely excited.

It was time to send it off to literary agents and publishers!

It is continually rejected. I went on to write other things but I keep coming back to it because it was the first one. My first born. A perfect moment for me, forever preserved in literary amber. This was me at sixteen.

A week ago, I was listening to my Ipod and the song “I’m Afraid of Americans” by David Bowie came on. It was one of the illustrious songs on the soundtrack I put together when I was writing *Golden Red*. I was hit with a wave of nostalgia and a wave of sadness. Too bad the book would never be published. I’d given up. It was a strange thing to do to *Golden Red*, the antithesis of what the book was about. I let the publishing world get to me and convince me to hide it away.

“God is an American.” The song stated.

A re-write. That’s what the book needed. A small re-write. I never liked the very opening of the first chapter anyways! Well, what if I changed that? And a few other things? At first the idea somewhat horrified me. It would be like telling someone to rewrite the Bible. It was my own sacred scripture and I was about to go against the Word. But I was that Word. I changed. I got older. Why couldn’t the Word do the same?

It made me think of the whole weird process from twelve to sixteen. When I was twelve, I was in love with everything. When I was sixteen, I was angry. I wanted to break something. Maybe it was the cage around myself I wanted to break. The Student Council’s words from the anime *Revolutionary Girl Utena*, one of the biggest inspirations for *Golden Red*, rang so loudly in my ears that I wrote them on my door in black sharpie. “If it cannot break its egg’s shell, a chick will die without being born. We are the chick. The world is our egg. If we don’t crack the world’s shell, we will die without being born. Smash the world’s shell! For the revolution of the world!”

The best way to smash something is with a hammer. *Golden Red* was my hammer. My hope is that it will be a hammer for others one day. I want other teenagers to read it so that they know that someone out there does know exactly how they feel. My story is a coming-of-age story and without it, I never would have come of age.