

SO MANY STORIES, SO LITTLE TIME

by Terry Carroll

On Monday, August 28, 2023, at nine in the morning, Dick Charleson woke up feeling amorous. His condition was a surprise in light of *la petite mort* in which he and Ginny had engaged the previous night. At an earlier stage of life, he would have scoffed at the notion of this early-morning response in a man aged fifty-nine. Yet here he lay, distracted by the unmistakable evidence.

Thinking about his age brought to mind a much lower number: Four. A dreaded numeral in various Chinese cultures where it rhymed with, or sounded like, death. He had a mere four days to write as many as five thousand words of acceptable fiction for a collection being published by St. Thameston Emerging Writers, informally called STEW. Actually, fewer than four full days. He had used up, or wasted, or romped away nine hours in sleep after allowing himself to be seduced by Ginny. A new, exciting experience, but one that now left him a paltry eighty-seven hours.

Oh, but it was worse, so very much worse than that. Unless he were to email in a first draft at 11:59 p.m. on August 31—a horrifying prospect that instantly caused him to lose the final traces of his libidinous longing—he needed to budget two days for rewriting and final edits. And another fourteen hours for food, sleep, and regular breaks. Ye gods, he was reduced to twenty-five! As no less an authority than Dr. Seuss once asked, “How did it get so late so soon?” He would need to average two-hundred words an hour in just a little over twenty-four hours.

Once upon a time, this would have been a snap. He had spent most of his working life in community newspapers where veterans worth their pay cheques could crank out three-or four-hundred-word stories in thirty minutes. In December 2015 when he was downsized as editor at *The Mississauga Courier*, he could have produced two-hundred words an hour with one eye blindfolded and one hand tied behind his back ... assuming all interviews had been completed and he had nailed down the theme of the story. But aye, there’s the rub, as the Bard had so famously intoned. Richard Elmore Charleson—Dick to his friends and customers—had exhausted his slim backlog of themes. According to the editor STEW had hired under an arts grant to coordinate the project, he had submitted two short stories that were duds, calamitous failures. The Dreaded Editor, as he had come to think of her, hadn’t just critiqued his work. She had carpet-bombed both stories. He had nothing left in the Bank of Ideas. As Sylvia Plath observed well before she gassed herself in an oven, the worst enemy of creativity is self-doubt. Dick was capable of self-plathation any day of the week.

In theory, he could follow the advice of Samuel Johnson—no man but a blockhead ever wrote except for money—and forsake the entire enterprise, since all profits from *The Book* would accrue to the writers' group, not to the writers. And if he reneged, he'd leave space for the efforts of more junior, more modern, scribblers. A magnanimous gesture.

Yet, yet, yet, as a point of pride, he was reluctant to do that. He had founded STEW in 2017, a year after he had purchased his combined bookstore and living quarters on Main Street, St. Thameston for \$150,000, well before the Greater Toronto Area, Kitchener/Waterloo/Guelph hordes started selling out for millions and descending on the small city. A no-show from him would be looked upon by other writers in the group as a violation of the first rule of the Fiction Critique Group, a dictum he had invented: If you are a fiction writer, you write fiction.

No good could come from stewing in bed. Dick threw off the covers and threw on a black T-shirt emblazoned with the slogan "Fiction Writers Write," blue jeans, white ankle socks and Birkenstocks. He schlepped his way to the bathroom for mouthwash before going to the kitchen to see whether Virginia Hurston, sole lawyer at Hurston & Associates, Barristers & Solicitors, was awaiting her new lover, or had already headed into the office. Her chosen field was family law, mostly Legal Aid cases. Serious stuff that failed to pay serious money.

A bookstore regular, she had engaged him for weeks in stimulating conversations about the literary life before she saw the "Room For Rent" sign taped to his desk six months ago. "Would you consider me?" she, a widow, had asked. A widower himself, Dick had responded to her loneliness. Perhaps more importantly, he had welcomed the rent money, unencumbered cash being the lifeblood of all used and antiquarian book dealers. Her moving-in had presaged a meeting of the wallets as well as the minds. Before settling in, she had drawn up an agreement that appeared to cover all eventualities. Somehow, he had missed the paragraph covering the ramifications of friends deciding to get it on with each other.

"Good morning, lover boy."

She planted a wet kiss on his right cheek. Such lips! Swollen, probing bands of flesh that last night had conveyed a charming hesitation at first, as if seeking affirmation of attraction—if not hints of that loaded four-letter word, love—before fully committing. Once unleashed or released or satisfied as to his response, those lips proved to be living, humming, assuring testaments to the power of spiritual and physical communion. As enthusiastic lovers much younger than he might rhapsodize, they were hot.

Could he mine fictional gold from the seduction of an aging bookseller by an alluring tenant? Could a short story explore the blossoming of friendship and intellectual compatibility into copacetic carnality? The crisis of the story, the pointy top

of the Freytagian pyramid, would be the emotional swamp into which the protagonist wanders the morning after, right before the decline into falling action. He has prepared no reaction to this moment, which any fool could have seen coming. Comedy segues into tragedy.

No, no, no. The idea was too personal, too recent, too raw. He shook his head, physically discarding the ridiculous concept, and picked up on Ginny's variation of the dangerous four-letter word, keeping it light. "Good morning to you, lover girl."