

The Writers Club

By

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The letter that arrived in Hamish Leonard's post box that Thursday morning in June was unexpectedly light. He stood in the Post Office foyer in front of the rows of tiny doors to the post boxes and licked his dry lips.

They didn't send my manuscript back. The thought went round and around in his head. *They didn't reject it.*

A sudden urge to know, to see what they had written him overwhelmed the initial shock at seeing the neatly printed return address on the top corner of the envelope. Hamish tore it open carefully not wanting to damage the single page within. He slid the sheet out and unfolded it, his lips moving as he read the short response to his submission.

Dear Mr Leonard,

Thank you for your recent submission to the Blackwood Writers Club.

We have reviewed your application for membership and would like to extend an invitation for you to attend our upcoming meeting.

You will be contacted.

Regards

Adrian W.

Secretary

Blackwood Writers Club Inc.

Hamish's whoop of delight echoed through out the lobby, he ran back to his car and sang with more volume and enthusiasm than skill to the songs on the radio all the way home.

He pored over the letter many times in the few days that lead up to the meeting date. The Blackwood Writers Club, if the rumours were to be believed, was as close to a secret society as writers had. There were those who said it was a cult and others claimed it was an elitist publishing house marketing campaign. Hamish didn't care; he would have gladly sold his soul to get his first novel manuscript published. The pile of rejection letters filled with cruel and cutting words from editors pouring scorn on his labours twisted his heart, making him bitter and angry to his very core. The most shameful were the standard letters from editors who hadn't bothered to pretend they had read his manuscript.

The BWC as it was referred to, produced best selling authors. Hamish had spent months conducting his research, opening book after book in a hundred different stores and libraries, there in each author biography page was the small icon, a tiny

black tree, the seal of the BWC, and yet many of the books had been published by a myriad of different houses.

The works of the BWC members covered a range of genres, Horror, Sci-Fi, Detective novels, even romance. Having membership in the BWC it seemed guaranteed you a fast track to publishing success, a place on the best sellers list and very lucrative contracts for follow up books.

Hamish's hands curled into fists and his teeth clenched, he snatched up the carefully collected folder of rejection letters. With a howl of gleeful fury he ripped the pages out and tore them into chunks, paper fluttered everywhere and he stamped on each descending piece.

"Blackwood Writers Club! Blackwood Writers Club!" He shrieked at each hateful letter that he trod under foot. He was going to show each and every one of those smug pricks.

Hamish barely slept for the next week and he started at every sound and car that drove past his dingy flat. He was passed out on his bed, unconscious from stressed exhaustion when he was roughly assaulted, a duct tape gag was pressed to his mouth and a dark hood was dragged over his head and his hands were taped behind his back.

"Blackwood Writers Club," a voice hissed in his ear and Hamish immediately stilled his physical protestations. They hefted the now meek writer to his feet and bundled him out of the apartment and into a waiting car. Hamish spent an hour lying on the floor barely able to breathe through the heavy fabric of the hood.

When the car stopped Hamish was dragged into a building, dumped on a cold hard floor and with the slam of a heavy door he was left alone in sudden silence.

Time passed and Hamish was filled with doubts. Was this possibly just a prank? Was this all some cruel joke by some wretched person who was jealous of his talent?

A heavy muffled clank sound brought him out of his anxious analysis, with a slow creak a door opened and instead of footsteps there was only silence.

Hamish blinked and gasped for air as the hood was pulled off his head, and the tape was ripped cleanly away from his face.

“Good evening sir,” the man who had opened the door was dressed in an old fashioned morning suit. He was broad shouldered, though so gaunt that the pale colour of his skin was as close as he came to lard and he was completely lacking in hair, even his eyebrows were absent.

“I- My name is Hamish Leonard, I have-“

“You are expected sir,” the butler drew a shining blade and with a quick gesture slit the tape bonds on Hamish’s wrists and stepped back.

Hamish climbed to his feet and took stock; he was standing in a well presented entrance hall. The floor was a mosaic of marble tiles, anonymous portraits glowered down from the walls and heavy velvet drapes in deep red muffled the color of the walls.

“This way sir,” the butler glided past, his patent leather black shoes catching the light from the low burning lamps but making no sound as he lead Hamish down

the length of the hall to a heavy drape that he parted with a sweep of the hand, revealing an archway and a set of stone steps going down.

“To the bottom of the stairs sir,” the butler stood aside, holding the heavy fabric back to allow Hamish to pass through.

Hamish descended the stairs alone. The electric lamps glowed dimly here, casting puddles of thick yellow light, the scant glow at his back vanished as the butler let the curtain fall. At the bottom a second door, a second lion’s head knocker and it also opened immediately after Hamish struck it lightly.

“Ernest Klein,” said the man who opened the door with a broad smile and immediately extended a hand and engaged Hamish’s in a firm, professional handshake.

Ernest Klein of course needed no introduction to Hamish, Ernest Klein was famous and his books sold millions of copies. Hamish felt his face flush with delight, “Mister Klein, an honour to meet you, truly an honour. Gosh, I’m your biggest fan. ”

Klein continued to smile warmly, Hamish mentally kicked himself. He was meant to be here as a writer, not as some gushing fan-boy idiot.

“I’m Hamish, Hamish Leonard,” he added sheepishly.

“Come in Hamish, I read your manuscript. It will need some work, but you have a strong sense of story, and I think you will benefit greatly from the assistance our little group can provide.” Ernest rumbled in a good natured fatherly way that immediately relaxed Hamish. If Ernest Klein was here, then that was worth the trip alone.

The room beyond was something of a disappointment after the gothic excess of the entrance. Comfortable chairs were arrayed in rows facing the back of the room where a wide theatre curtain was currently closed against the view of what was beyond. A small charcoal brazier was glowing with near smokeless heat between the curtain and the first row of chairs. To one side of the room a table held a steaming coffee urn and a tray of mugs, plastic wrapped plates of sandwiches and muffins lay ready for a post meeting supper.

Hamish was quickly introduced to many of his favourite living authors, Essie Gelder, her science fiction series about a female bounty hunter had just been adapted into a major Hollywood blockbuster, Tony Irving, author of over forty best selling novels that ranged from horror, detective, drama and even Westerns. Paul Gifford, bestselling horror author and editor of the popular "Chilling Tales" magazine, Adrian Witherspoon who had published dozens of romance novels under the pen name Lucy Wolfe and a dozen more writing celebrities.

Hamish's hand was pumped by each in turn, he found himself answering questions about his writing, discussing points of plot and style and the endless grind of getting his foot in the door of a publisher with fabulously successful people who treated him as an equal. The advice, and contacts and suggestions and encouragement were more than he could have ever dreamed of. Several hours passed, and Hamish was enthralled, he retrieved the ever present notebook and pen from his pocket to scribble notes and to his crushing embarrassment Harold Montgomery,

author of seven spy thrillers and a Hugo nominated science fiction novel that critics said had “re-defined the genre”, placed a heavy hand over the paper and said gravely,

“There will be time enough for notes later Hamish. We do not share what goes on within our meetings, even with each other.”

Hamish felt his ears burning, “Sorry, damn...” He thrust the notebook back into his pocket, feeling like the world’s biggest loser. The crushing embarrassment ended when Ernest cleared his throat and in his booming sermonising tone called for the attention of all present.

When the chatter had subsided he began, “Ladies and Gentlemen, welcome once again to the quarterly meeting of the Blackwood Writers Club. Please take a seat and we will begin.”

Hamish found a chair among the others and within moments the room was hushed again.

“Our first order of business is the welcoming of our new probationary member, Mister Hamish Leonard.” Ernest paused for the polite applause, hands clapped Hamish on the back, and his blush renewed at the unexpected warmth of the attention.

“We receive a number of applications for membership, and your commitment to the art of writing and the potential of your manuscript impressed us Hamish. We sincerely believe that you will find the benefits of full membership very rewarding.”

Ernest paused a moment, his voice suddenly changing to a far less jovial tone.

“However I must ensure that you understand that all activities, proceedings and discussions held within these meetings are entirely secret. You may not under any circumstances disclose any information regarding the Blackwood Writers Club to any person outside of this room. Even if that person provides proof of their membership.”

Hamish found himself nodding solemnly; Ernest’s eyes glittered with flint hardness. “The penalties for breaching our rules are harsh, and you will soon understand why. Now Hamish Leonard, do you confirm you wish to enter into the sacred ranks of the Blackwood Writers Club?”

The room was silent and still, no one seemed to breathe. Hamish swallowed hard, “Ye- Yes, Yes I do.”

“Come forward Hamish Leonard.”

Hamish stood up and the entire congregation stood as well, he moved his way to the end of the row and approached the front. It was only when he stood closer to the brazier, and felt the heat coming from it that Hamish realised there was a metal handled poker buried in the heart of the glowing embers.

“Bare your right arm Hamish Leonard.” Ernest intoned in a solemn dirge.

Hamish did so, resisting the urge to laugh, surely this was some kind of joke, a hazing ritual? Behind him he heard the soft rustle of cloth, he glanced quickly at the audience, and each had bared their own right arms and held them out, palm down pointing towards him.

“By the baptism of pain and fire, we mark our entrance into the sacred ranks of the Blackwood Writers Club. Let he who is prepared to suffer and sacrifice for his art bear this brand with pride.”

With these words Ernest lifted the poker from the brazier, the end was flattened into a small metal disc that fizzed and sparked with gathered heat.

Ernest calmly reached out and took Hamish’s arm. Turning the palm up, he lifted the branding iron over the stunned man’s forearm, “Blackwood Writers Club welcomes you,” Ernest said gravely and pressed the glowing iron onto Hamish’s white skin.

The shock of it took a moment to register, strangely there was no pain, and the brand hissed and spat against his moist flesh for a mere second before being withdrawn and replaced in the brazier. Then Hamish shrieked, the startled nerves screamed at the horrific assault and he tore his wounded arm from Ernest’s grip and clutching himself he stared at Ernest in horror.

“Are you completely mad!” he yelled.

Ernest regarded Hamish calmly and then slowly rolled up his own sleeve, turning his arm outwards so that the puckered scar of a burn in the shape of the seal of the BWC was visible.

Hamish gaped, and turned to the audience, they all turned their exposed arms outwards and showed that they too bore the scar of membership.

“Susan will help you dress that burn,” Ernest said in a gentle tone. “It will smart for a few days, but it certainly won’t stop you writing the revisions to your manuscript.”

Hamish blinked in astonishment; they were acting like this kind of thing was quite normal.

“This may sting a little,” Susan Heedon, best selling cookbook and young adult literature writer. Not Hamish’s preferred reading material, but the woman was mobbed by her young fans when she made public appearances.

She delicately dabbed some soothing cream on the blistered burn and then swiftly wrapped the wound in a sterile dressing.

“You can take a seat again now Hamish, we will continue with the meeting.”

Hamish stumbled back to his seat, there were more pats on the back and murmured congratulations from those around him, but he barely noticed.

“Success in writing is nearly impossible to achieve,” Ernest was preaching again, his voice filled the room with dignity and gravity.

“Truly talented authors are never recognised, their work rejected by editors, their dreams and hard work never achieving its rightful place as a gift for all mankind.”

The audience nodded and murmured agreement as if they were in a Baptist Revival meeting.

“The Blackwood Writers Club has a long history of great success, we understand that to be truly great, you need more than talent, you need more than a

good agent. A writer must have cold blooded determination and an overwhelming desire to succeed no matter what the cost. Success in the writing industry requires sacrifice. "

On cue the heavy curtain behind Ernest parted and revealed a candle lit stone altar. Stretched out upon it on his back, gagged with a wide strip of duct tape and tied spread eagled was a flabby, soft fleshed balding man clad only in a pair of white underpants.

When the curtain parted he began to make odd grunting sounds, his eyes bulged and he thrashed against his bonds.

Hamish was stunned, was this some other initiate?

Ernest raised his hands as if in prayer "Brothers and sisters of the Blackwood Writers Club, please step forward and join me in the ceremony."

The congregation rose and Hamish went with them. They gathered in a circle around the altar and the trussed figure upon it.

"Success in writing requires sacrifice," Ernest intoned.

"Success in writing requires sacrifice," the writers echoed in one voice.

"Cold blooded determination is not enough," Ernest spoke and was echoed by the others, Hamish felt himself joining in the response.

"We welcome Hamish Leonard into our ranks. We call upon him to make the sacrifice, to bring fortune and favour upon his works."

"Fortune and favour be yours," the writers replied.

Ernest lifted an ornate dagger from behind the altar and stepped towards Hamish.

“This man, this sacrifice, is a critic for the *National Literary Review*. His vile and ill conceived reviews have harmed the careers of many talented authors. Take this dagger, plunge it into his heart, and you will find success beyond your wildest dreams.”

The blade was turned to Hamish, handle first. He took it, feeling the serpentine carvings of the bone pommel icy cold against the stinging sweat of his palms. The ragged edged triangular blade seemed to be made of knapped stone. Hamish was nearly swooning from the rush of adrenaline from his wound and the excitement of being amongst such hallowed company. He could feel a presence, the physical sense of a dark shadow hungry for blood and souls pressing against him on all sides, an ethereal form whose eyes were blazing red with malice and the power to grant his dearest wish if he would make an offering of life. The blade in his hand was the key; he could feel the carved serpent on the handle writhing in anticipation under his grip.

Hamish' mouth was dry and his mind reeling with shock at the situation unfolding before him. Then the dark presence touched him, and he felt his desire rising from some deep place inside. The deepest recesses of his imagination, where his darkest plot ideas, his most despicable characters and disturbed visions were born, he felt a deep sense of acceptance. He wanted success more than anything, he wanted to

be Hamish Leonard, author. *Fortune and favour upon your works...* the shadows promised.

Tightening his grip on the blade Hamish stepped to the altar.

"I want to be a best selling author," he croaked.

Hamish raised the dagger above his head; he could hear the chanting of his fellow writers, "Sacrifice! Sacrifice! Sacrifice!" Hamish closed his eyes, *bestselling author...* his inner voice whispered and he plunged the dagger down into the writhing form before him.