

WEIRD HISTORY OF A LONELY SHORT STORY

Pjotr Smaad

Novel

Uitgeverij Kwaliteit

Colophon

Weird History of a Lonely Short Story

© Pjotr Smaad

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or sold without permission.

Author: Pjotr Smaad

Editor: Uitgeverij Kwaliteit

Design: Osbourne Cox

Printing and Production: Printforce

For DBC Pierre

Wer sich über die Wirklichkeit nicht hinauswagt,
Der wird die die Wahrheit erobern.

Friedrich Schiller

The editor, bookshop owner and literary reviewer are in their judgement
always right!

Anonymous

FOREWORD PIERRE BOKMA

Had some trouble with my phone! Never really got used to it. Phew! Gonna read them all and see if I can throw up a few 'Snappy sentences'! Send it on. Always interested!

When is the Deadline?

Your trip, the day of our 'reunion' did that turn out right? I doubt there is a single restaurant in the Netherlands that can compete with Welling, unless it is on 'Schier' Van De Werf.

Well that means the decline has set in, if my name doesn't even make a splash at Starbucks!

Tomorrow I have the premiere of 'Door de Bank Genomen 2.0', ten years later and since the day before yesterday we have been overtaken by current events, which means that last minute adjustments have to be made, always a source of stress for those concerned. Tom has lost thirty kilos, had himself rebuilt and is now called Linde van de Heuvel. The tall Leopold has been restored by a plastic surgeon and has returned in a much improved version under the name Adam Jisequell.

Therefore, send a follow-up to this message around the weekend! I hope that you will not be defamatory at all!

Clever, then one Novel can tell you how to write the other. One Novel can be the director of the other and ultimately each other's 'spectators'. Chapeau! Noble!

But I would really like to make an appointment a little earlier about something so interesting. I really regret it, but without running a great risk of having to default, I unfortunately cannot aproof and contribute with a preface.

Next time, please!

Greetings Pierre

PART 1

BOOKSHOP CITY



1.

For quite some time now, whenever he jolted awake and rose from the shelves of a condemned bookcase--which served as his terraced house in Bookshop City--one question relentlessly plagued him and wouldn't leave his mind; deep in his sewn-in heart, Short Story--who was a pocket-sized edition, pale and grey among neighboring books, as if shaded in by a child with a colored pencil--yearned to grow in the number of his pages. He had formed a relationship with the laminated cover of a discarded copy of One Thousand and One Nights, found in the street, whose author and owner were both unknown. Gazing at his reflection in that cover each morning, he would often say to himself:

"Oh, how I'd love to be a Novel, or perhaps a Film Script, or even a Screenplay for a popular TV series. Just something from another genre. A form with more social standing in Bookshop City than myself."

But whenever he got going with such drowsy daydreams upon waking, the reflection in that so-called mirror would not show his own cover, but instead, a fogged-up glimpse of his mother--a Detective--would emerge, and she would say:

"Must you? Quit it. If you want to develop into a meaningful book someday, you're lacking far too much, missing the essential structure that books your age have long since acquired. What a flimsy attitude. You're just like your father, who left the moment you were born and was nothing more than a toolbox manual. And from what I hear, nothing ever came of him either."

Those kinds of days usually ended with him crawling right back into bed. And so, minute after minute, the limited life cycle of him as a book ticked away, day after day flew by, with barely anything happening--his existence remained modest in size. There it was, he realized, shivering on that spring morning: the vicious circle in which he was stuck.

This quiet, almost rural kind of life was suddenly, and quite roughly, disturbed to such a degree that he would sometimes long for the calm hopelessness he had known before. The direct cause: a more or less accidental encounter with that annoying guy, the Gossip Column, the day before. Despite his slick design and glamorous cover, the Gossip Column was always quick and cutting in conversation. Many books from the dustier and more densely packed inner neighborhoods of Bookshop City avoided him--not least to keep from becoming the subject of his acidic banter. He had been in top form yesterday, unfortunately, sitting at a terrace tucked under an awning to stay in the shade--and to wreak his usual havoc unseen.

“Hey, Short Story. Over here. Quick!”

That was the annoying thing about summer approaching: all the outdoor cafés made it impossible to avoid someone on the street. Short Story had no choice but to go to him.

“There's just been an attack. A Crime Novel has gone totally off the rails,” panted the Gossip Column. “A serialized one even, with many parts and all kinds of nastiness. A full-on settling of scores in the underworld of Bookshop City and the crime fiction scene. They say the screaming could be heard miles away.”

Short Story hesitated to respond. The Column eyed him suspiciously and said:

“You're not brushing me off, are you?”

“No, Mr. Gossip Column. Wouldn't dare.”

“Good. Better not.”

The physical violence between books--the bodily kind, but also their inner turmoil--had been growing noticeably and alarmingly in recent years. Short Story couldn't understand why. Being kind was surely more pleasant. Especially for a romance novel, sweetness was a must--and commercially essential, wasn't it? He could have asked a group of old Greek Translations at the edge of his neighborhood, who always seemed to have explanations for

everything. But yesterday, he hadn't felt like it. Those Classical Works tended to be even more long-winded than the Gossip Column, and he wouldn't have had time to get to his own meager content—which, after all, was the whole point.

The words of the Gossip Column buzzed in his mind like bees—busy bees—giving him a headache, as if he weren't held together by Chinese binding thread, but by half a dozen iron nails. And so it was without a word of goodbye and barely a nod that Short Story left the terrace. He conveniently forgot, for a moment, that books, in their deepest essence, were thoughts. And when those thoughts became obsessed with a disturbing subject, a precarious matter, or a hot theme, you could bet your last drop of the most toxic book glue on it—or set the clock in the writers' café to five minutes before six, frozen—and you'd still get caught up in it yourself.

That's how it went with books. And so it went for Short Story too.

After making the optimistic decision that morning to act more professionally and improve his habit of cutting corners, he first went for a cup of pure coffee with his most loyal friend: the Lexicon of Literary Terms. His kindhearted companion—whose very good nature made many suspect he battled deep depressions daily—was, of course, aware of this impression. And when he felt his mood dip, you'd hear him cheerfully exclaim: "Bien!" And if he spent hours hesitating, delaying important tasks while worrying about the outcome, he would say to Short Story: "This is going well, I'll get started in a second. No really, it's going well!"

In that sense, there wasn't a vulgar cloud in the sky. They simply had their boastful slurping session. To be precise, in the Writers' Café—recognizable by half a dozen round tables with Thonet chairs and a purplish marble bar behind a grand window on Bookshop Square. This time, their idle chatter was about story arcs.

When the juice had run out, around the beginning of the afternoon, Short

Story hurried off to the library in search of some depth. Overcome by a sudden craving, he stopped at a snack bar. If only he hadn't. If only he'd skipped it. After scarfing down a tray of pun-laden fries with mayo, and resuming his path toward the Public Library, he was soon overtaken not only by a nagging suspicion—paranoia served by the ladle, courtesy of his Detective mother, was nothing new to him—but by an undeniable sense that something odd was going on. On both sides of the canal street, a squad of curiously covered books had been shadowing him for a while.

To check whether this annoying feeling was real, he darted into a side alley. But he froze on the spot. Where the heck had he ended up? This dead-end alley, reeking of literary reviews flung like feces, was not a place he'd ever seen before.

Up ahead on the left, leaning against the fence of a second-hand construction yard—still shimmering with heat—stood the transport vehicle of a locally feared theater books club: an antique moving truck with a wide loading bed made of brown timber beams, rising all the way above its red cab. On the wooden side panels, postmodern spidery lettering spelled out the club's pretentious name, thankfully so cryptic that any intended meaning flew right over Short Story's head.

Now, everyone in Bookshop City knew you shouldn't judge a book by its cover, but when four shadows soon appeared at the alley's entrance—when his pursuers didn't dissolve into curling opium smoke—Short Story acted quickly. With gasoline fumes making him woozy, he decided to hide behind the stage transport. Between the broken-down fence and the truck cab. Using a step rail, he hopped up and clung, as best he could, to a bizarre kind of side mirror. In that mirror, he secretly flirted with himself and noticed—perhaps indulgently—that for a book in his stage of the life cycle, he didn't look half bad. And as if the universe wanted to slap him for that cheeky bit of vanity, to punish his smugness with a jolt of poetic justice, a cowardly thud sounded to his right, deep in the shadowy part of the alley. As if someone

had fallen. As if the Great Reader in the sky had dropped from the clouds a book, which landed there in the darkness with a dull thump.

Meanwhile, the suspicious-looking foursome—who seemed even blinder than the benevolent Roman goddess Justitia herself—were studying the alley sign with great scrutiny.

“This better be the Punctuation Alley, dammit,” grumbled a dark brown Potboiler.

“If you can read, it is,” snapped a massive Crime Novel, the word MURDER embossed in silver across his black leather cover, delivering a swift comeback.

Silence followed.

“Look, I don’t know about the rest of you, but I’ve got better things to do today,” rasped the Potboiler again.

“Oh really, like what?” teased a Pocket-sized book standing to his right, clearly enjoying the tension.

“Careful now!” said the Potboiler. “You’ve got to stay close to the truth, or you’re in real trouble—Pocket Guide!”

A speckled Cash Register Book—who at first glance seemed a strange fit in this grim little gang but evidently served as their advisor, consigliere, and intellectual anchor—cleared his throat in a restrained manner and said:

“Easy now, calm down, boys. Look, here he comes.”

From the dead-end side of the alley, shuffled a light green Booklet closer, visibly worn, with an unreadable title. Not too big, not too small. Clearly, he had been through a lot: not only was his name nearly completely gone, but a tear ran down his front, and in several places the plastic laminate—which once gave him shine—had peeled away from the cardboard, now curling downward in delicate little ribbons. He strolled casually past the transport truck on the opposite side and came to a stop with his battered spine facing Short Story, who, peeking between the cab and the truck bed, couldn’t

manage to catch the registered name—not even with a squint. For a moment, he thought he saw a number.

“So? That was the last one?” asked the Green Book cheerfully, almost provocatively.

“No, not even close. It’s still a big job, sir,” the Potboiler admitted, with a touch of humility and deference. “Nobody wants to hand over their Incidents. And that serialized Crime Novel from yesterday? He totally lost his mind.”

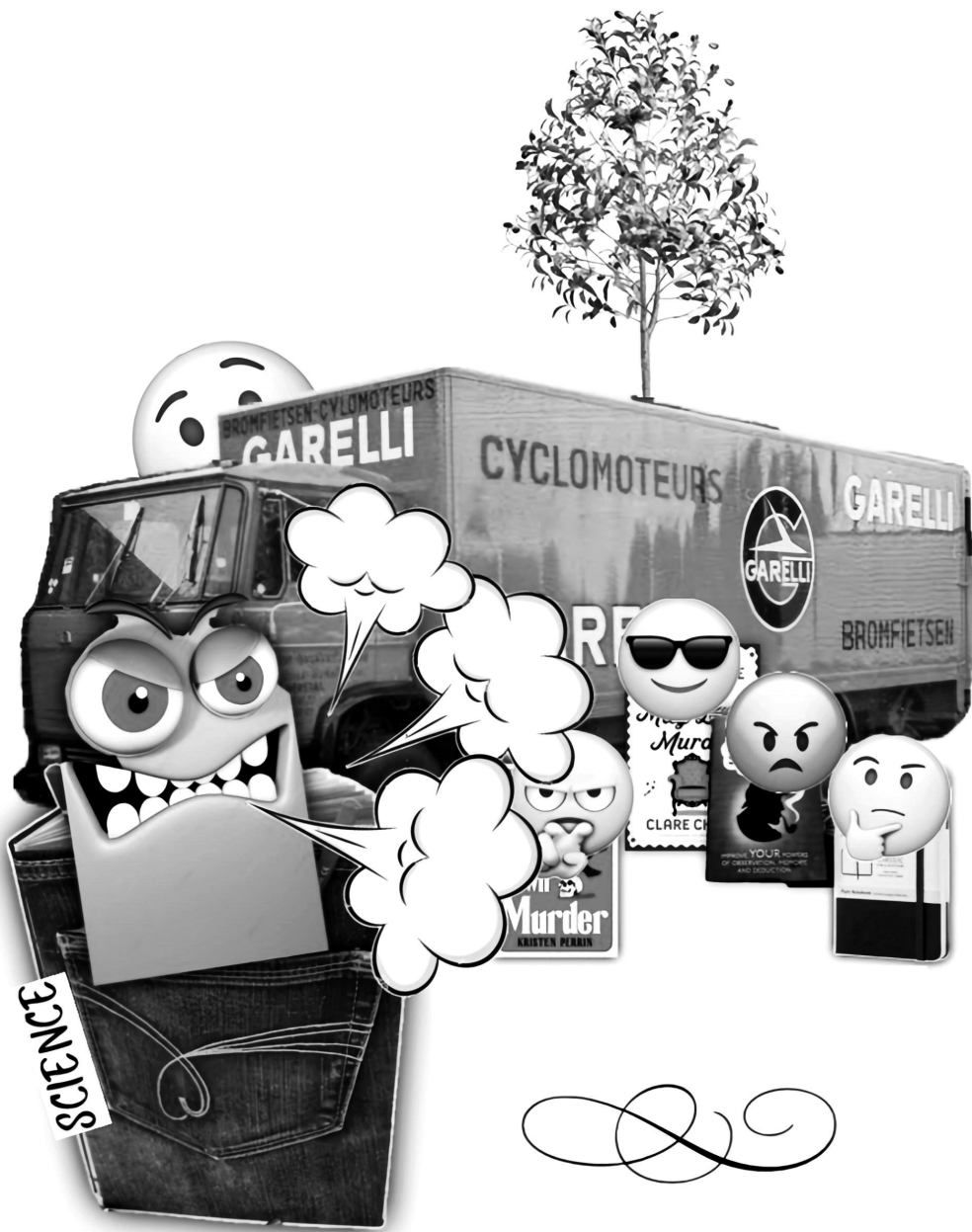
“But can we get to the point now and settle up before the blue Tax Guide catches wind of this again?” interrupted the Cash Book, articulating every word with hyper-correct precision.

“Certainly not in this stinking alley, you idiot. You can’t conduct business here.”

“And what did you have in mind then, sir?” sneered the Murder Mystery with the black leather cover. “Some pathetic country lane? Or a cornfield freshly irrigated? That’s begging for Incidents, while I thought we were trying to avoid exactly those...”

A sweaty silence followed and spread along the full length of the alley. To Short Story, it felt like the pause between two phone rings—a quietness that grows heavier the longer someone waits to pick up. And to his alarm, it didn’t go without consequence. The Green Book flushed red. The ground began to tremble. An inner burst of aggression—a glowing, magma-like eruption of energy—caused him to expand many times in size, swelling from a handy pocket edition into a dense, dimwitted, and heavily discounted hardcover Essay. And as if he were opening his jaws, his book cover sprang wide, unleashing a fluorescent rain of sparks—words and letters bursting out from between his pathologically miss numbered pages—spraying over the Crime Books like a scene from the great book burning of 1933, threatening to scorch them all.

“No, no, truly sir—easy now. We understand and we’re going about it as



calmly as possible,” said the Cash Book, hastily flipping through some crudely estimated deductions. “We’ll handle the whole thing for you extremely quickly.”

“Then listen. And listen well, all of you. When every single original Personal Incident and Unique Idea has been stolen and fully exported out of the city—when every inhabitant has even less content than a Dummy—only then will I deliver your full payment in one go. And mark my words: don’t even think about holding back a single Incident for personal use, or I’ll drop a hefty Reference Work on your atypical roof. Got that clear enough? Goodbye.”

After his final words, the Green Book turned around and shuffled off toward the shadowy end of the alley, while Short Story strained and did his utmost to decipher either the ISBN or the title. Regrettably, the green cover was already too far out of sight for a little Story with poor eyesight.

“Well, that wraps it up for us,” said the Pocket, hoarse with irritation.

“You’re right about that,” sighed the Cash Book. And it was precisely at that moment that Short Story, uncomfortable in his position, shifted his weight—producing, much to the irritation of the four, a hyperbole of noise.

“What was that?” said the Potboiler. “Been snacking on a bunch of onomatopoeias again, pickpocket?”

“No, man, it came from over there,” said the silver Crime Novel, pointing toward the transport truck. The Pocket and his Murder colleague stepped closer. Short Story tried to slip unseen past the front of the cab toward the dark part of the alley, but the two Crime Books blocked his way thoroughly.

“Damn,” hissed the Pocket. “That guy heard everything. And a tiny scribble like him always wants something to tell.”

The Pocketbook drew a sharpened phrase from his predictable yet assertive contents. Fortunately, the Cash Book took over again.

“Easy now, boys. First, let’s have a look—does any of this pay off? Is there money to be made, or are we once again exerting ourselves for nothing?”

“What do you mean? As a Pocket, I’ll gladly print a run of him before he even hits his first edition.”

“What about his liquid assets?”

“Oh, Mr. Cash Book, looks promising to me,” chuckled the Murder Novel
“Look how thin it runs through his pages.”

Short Story went cross-eyed with panic. And then, like kitchen syrup, a stream of consciousness oozed from his meager table of contents—tropes and utterly insignificant phrases: Hello. Hey. No. Why? Sure. Connected. Bloody hell. Crime Scene. Thirsty. Whipped cream... and after a long pause, the listeners thought... alarm... state of alarm. Dirt poor, warmly recommended via the small intestine...

“Hey, cut it out. Stop that right now,” yelled the Potboiler. “Even we couldn’t tie a single roll of kite string to that nonsense to strangle someone with. We’re losing all basic meaning and any scrap of hooligan grip, and this’ll end badly—you’ll see.”

At that point, Short Story’s restraint was textbook. In terms of courteous behavior and polite composure, he was unmatched.

“So what now? Shall I give him a metaphor for his preface?” hissed the tiny Pocket.

A few hours later, the victim sat trembling at a small table in the police station, across from a Law Book. The Law Book was nearly completely hidden behind a massive typewriter. To calm the shaken one, a Report brought him a paper cup of pure coffee.

“There, there. Name first,” said the Law Book in a gruff bass.

“Short Story.”

“Excuse me?”

“Short Story.”

“One more time, please.”

“Again? It’s not really going smoothly here, is it?”

“No, no. Forging documents. Giving a false title, I suppose. You said something entirely different earlier.”

“Yes—Short Story.”

“Exactly. You won’t fool me, because that happens to be my favorite letter. Am I still on duty? Unfortunately, yes. All right, then. What happened?”

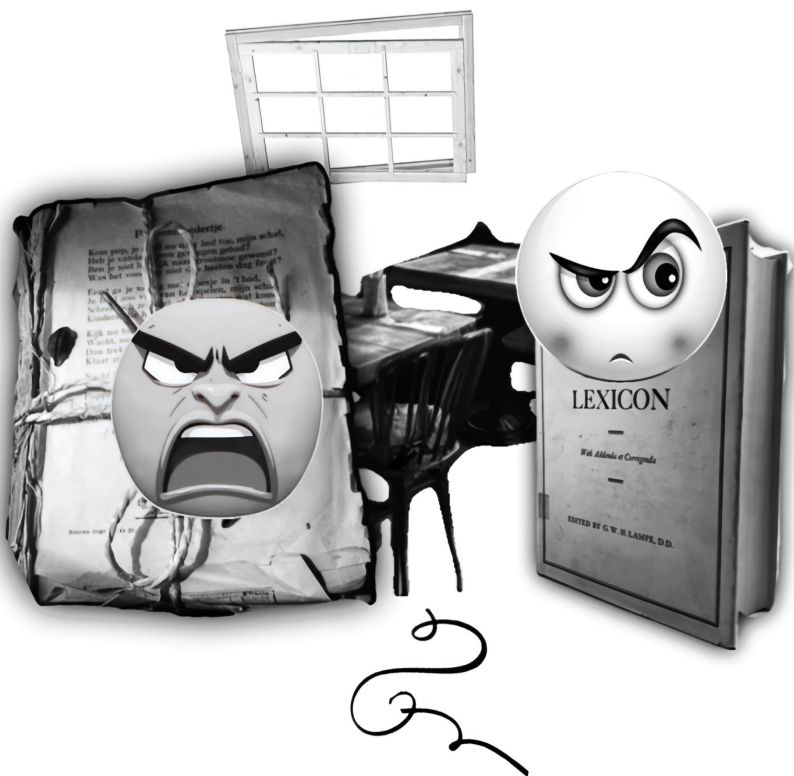
“I was on my way to the library, because I really want to become a novel, and then...”

“Wait. Hold on a sec, kid. I need to type this up. Delightful stuff. Tomorrow I’ll finally have something fun to share with the Chief Commissioner of Media during our pure coffee break. Way better than all those dull moral codes we have to peddle every day with fancy trimmings. Yeah... yeah, kid... and then?”

“Well, how should I put it. Since they found hardly any Personal Ideas or meaningful Incidents in me—and believe me, I’m really trying to change that—they took part of my Cover. I found it a few streets away, in a gutter.”

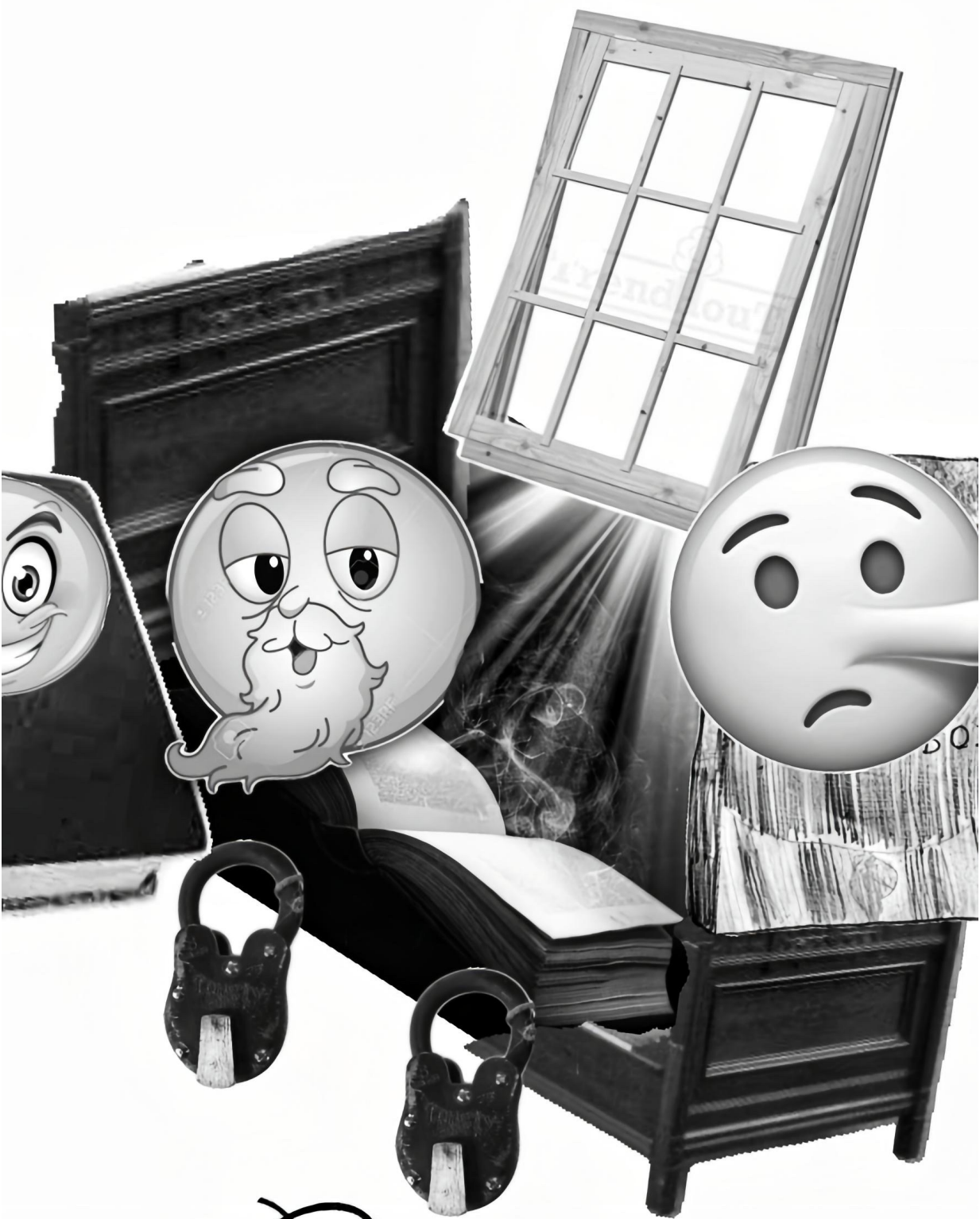
“Stop. Some glory-drunk Police Thriller has stolen my correction tape. Hey—who’s been messing with my type-ex!”

Much later than he would’ve liked, Short Story lay back on his shelf that evening. How was he ever supposed to become a novel if he no longer even dared approaching the library? He had acquired yet another fear. That helped a lot.





2



2

