

THE PLOT ■

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The writer laid down his pen. “To hell with this book and all its characters,” he said through clenched teeth, and with a spiteful temper none of his characters had ever possessed he snapped the pencil in half.

The reaction from the plot was not long in coming.

“What a pity,” they were saying in there when the news broke.

“Yes, a pity.”

“He showed such promise.”

“What a waste.”

“But if he’s going to be like that.”

“Yes, you’re right.”

“If he’s going to be like that, it’s for the best.”

“Still, what a shame.”

Jacob Mattes was his name, and he had been with them for two years now; in fact, they could still remember when they had wooed him. He had already written two novels at the time – solid works, both of them, and critically acclaimed; the first one had done surprisingly well for a debut, the second had put him through the roof. What a talent, they thought. They were sure he could do even better than those two books, and the vote among them had been unanimous. Still, they kept their

distance. They knew that second book had taken a lot out of him, had brought him to the brink of total exhaustion, and so they sat back and waited, letting the poor guy go on vacation, enjoy his day in the sun, maybe write a short story or two, and when the time came for him to consider writing that all-important third book they were there, proposing to him.

He did not disappoint them at first. What he did with their ideas, how he developed them was beyond their wildest hopes. The language was pure, it was adventurous, the words sparkling on the page like pebbles in a river bed. And then.

What happened? They were still trying to figure that out. Was it the money? They didn't think so. He lived comfortably, but he was by no means rich. He had a string of girlfriends, but they didn't think it was that, either. No, the more they thought about it, the more convinced they became that it had nothing to do with any outside influence at all and everything to do with the man himself. And they blamed themselves for not seeing it sooner. Could the disaster possibly have been averted?

The man himself, meanwhile, had no inkling of the plot's thoughts. He went on another long vacation, slept with a long line of beautiful women, and forgot completely about that book he had meant to write. He knew it could be writer's block, but for the time being he refused to entertain that thought. A lot of his writer friends had been afflicted with that disease, but he had laughed at them in private and there was no way he would ask them about a cure now.

A month, two months later, and he could no longer deny that he was sick. He tried his hand at a few haphazard plots, but nothing worked. In the end he returned to *The Iron Mattress*, not because he felt any love for that book – in fact, the

thought alone gave him stomach cramps - but because he had convinced himself that he would be unable to write anything else until he had finished it.

In the plot, too, they had kept an eye on developments, and when Mattes took up the pen again they were stunned. Warily they watched him settling into his old routines – waking up at six sharp, a hurried breakfast, then work until noon, lunch, sleep for an hour, then work until eight.

They hadn't foreseen this, and no one knew quite what to do. What was the protocol in a situation like this? They would have to confer with other plots, maybe call for a general meeting. But the man still had supporters. There were quite a few who argued in favor of giving him a second chance, and in the end they did.

By the end of the first week, they knew it was a mistake. Mattes was no longer the same man, or if he was, then he had managed to hide this part of himself remarkably well until now. He was hitting the booze hard, kept his apartment in a state of disrepair and squalor, and had started beating his girlfriend.

They had meant only to scare him. When Goro, the one-armed dwarf from *The Iron Mattress* stepped out of the manuscript, it was meant as a warning, nothing more; they wanted Mattes to leave the book alone – if he lost his mind as a consequence, then so be it; that was a risk they were willing to take, if only he would leave the book alone for all time.

But the writer was not in his study; he was outside, on his

way to a rendezvous, and when he saw Goro with his one arm dangling he was so upset and the timing was so unfortunate that the poor man was run over by a tram.

They couldn't afford to grieve; the subject matter was time-sensitive after all, and what's more, they already had their eyes set on someone else, a fine specimen this one, if slightly unusual – a schoolteacher and a Frenchman, recently retired, with not a single novel to his name yet. He would have been an unlikely candidate, except that Pierre Robichaux, who had read voraciously all his life, had quite recently – only in the last couple of days, in fact – thought to try his hand at fiction. His first attempts were enough to convince them; Robichaux was their man, and they were willing to try him out. One afternoon, with half of Paris out for a walk and with the sun pouring molten gold onto the sidewalk before the Elysee, they approached him. “Hey,” they said. “Listen.”