



## 1.

**“THERE HE IS,” SOMEONE WHISPERED.**

At the other end of the bar stood a stocky man with thinning hair and black-rimmed glasses. His skin gave off an unhealthy sheen; his eyes swam, magnified and vague, behind thick lenses. So this was the Pulitzer Prize–winning author (let’s call him Moe) who’d chosen my unpublished book as best new novel.

I’d gotten the call almost a year earlier. “I can’t believe it” was my response. I was serious. I’d forgotten I’d even entered the contest, and I suspected that Joe DeSalvo, cofounder of the Faulkner Society and bearer of these good tidings, was an

especially wily telemarketer. Next he’d offer me his editing services at a very reasonable fee.

Instead I got a check, which helped me stay happily underemployed for another six months, and a free trip to New Orleans to claim my Faulkner-headed gold medal. The society bestowing the prize was less than ten years old; the prize was not well-known but had the advantage of being easily confused with the prestigious PEN/Faulkner award, which was conferred upon a published book rather than a promising manuscript.

I’d arrived in New Orleans to claim my prize, but the threat of Hurricane Georges had sent everyone running; the society



# 13. THIRTEEN WAYS OF CLAIMING A LITERARY PRIZE

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had graciously invited all of the winners back this year. Now my husband Osvaldo and I were shivering in the air-conditioned ballroom of the Fairmont Hotel. (We'd dressed for the New Orleans heat.)

Besides the check, what had thrilled me most was the prospect of meeting Moe and getting his response to my novel. In the year since I'd won, I had written him a few times but had received no reply. Surely a face-to-face meeting would bear fruit. Toiling alone, as all writers do, I'd completely rewritten my book; no editor had yet laid eyes on the rewrite. Would Moe agree to be its first reader?

Swallowing the last of a screwdriver and grabbing Osvaldo by the hand, I made my way over to Moe and his pretty blond wife.

As I approached, vague ideas of master-apprentice relationships floated through my head. I'd never had a mentor. When older people had offered advice or help, I'd reacted with suspicion, wondering what they wanted in return. Now I knew I needed help, and probably always would need it, but I had reached the age at which I should have been a mentor myself. Just as I was ready to be taken under someone's wing, I was too big to fit.

"Are you Mr. Moe?" I asked.

He nodded.

I introduced myself. I didn't mention the letters he had never answered.

There was a long silence.

"Do you live here in New Orleans?" his wife finally said, trying to place me.

"We live in San Francisco," I said, putting my hand on Osvaldo's arm.

Another silence.

"I wrote *Written on Water*," I said. "Now it's *The Gospel of Gone*. It won the novel prize." I tried to pin down his eyes with my own, but they were as blurred as a bad snapshot. "Last year."

"Oh, yes, yes," he said hurriedly, looking over my head, across the room, down at the floor. "I can't remember. Were we in contact?"

"I wrote you," I said. *And didn't hear back*, I didn't say. Not hearing back is nothing remarkable for most writers. We knock on closed doors until our knuckles bleed. But the celebrated author who chooses your book from among hundreds — he had to open the door, if only just a crack, to say, *Well done!* Or, *Keep at it!* Which would suffice, although it was much less than what we all want to hear: *You, my friend, are a genius!*

"Yes," he said. "Now I remember. I've been so busy. I just came back from Australia. . . ."

I heard silverware clang, laughter erupt and die out. *Do you think the book's ending works?* I wanted to ask, but I couldn't find a way to shoehorn it into the nonconversation.

"It's too bad you and your wife have to leave so soon," I finally managed to say. They were flying out early the next morning, which meant Moe wouldn't be able to give me my medal at the awards ceremony.

"Yes," he agreed, turning away. I echoed his pivot, just a second or two behind, a student mimicking the master.

I couldn't eat my dinner but managed to suck down three more screwdrivers and two helpings of bread pudding with rum sauce. Between gulps I looked around. There was Robert Olen Butler at the buffet table, poking at a platter of meat. This year's novel judge (let's call her LuAnn) sat demurely a few tables away, her bright blue eyes and lacquered fingernails visible even from this distance. Her nails were a silky, dangerous black.

A few tables away from LuAnn sat the woman who'd been

runner-up in three contest categories. She kept telling the winners, with a tremor in her voice, how very, very happy she was for them.

On the plane ride there I'd devised a trick for keeping my bearings in this august atmosphere: I would repeat to myself, as often as necessary, *It's a big world, and you're a big girl*. Winning this prize was great, but it didn't necessarily mean I was on my way to fame and fortune, or even publication. I still had my talented, mostly obscure artist friends who struggled to write, paint, craft jewelry, or make films, and I had the solitary pleasure of sitting down to whatever story I happened to be working on that week, or month, or year.

And the world was bigger than fiction; like the convention of osteopaths meeting in a nearby hotel, fiction writers were just another microculture. Flexibility was the key to a writing career; I could always teach, or edit, or write website copy. And whatever happened, I was a big girl; I could take it.

But big girls do cry, and that night in our hotel room Osvaldo had his hands full trying to console me. "I should have punched the pig," he said in the early hours of the morning, which made me feel only a little better.

It wasn't the first time my naiveté had done me in. At a conference billed as a "community of writers" I had incurred the organizers' scorn for believing it to be just that. The brochure had promised that each participant would meet with one of the moderately successful writers teaching at the event. When I checked the schedule and saw that I'd been paired with an agent, I went to see if I could get a writer instead. (I already had an agent, who told me that I'd soon be able to live off my writing, but never returned my calls.)

"Did you hear the one about the Polish starlet?" sneered the scheduler, whose novel was soon to be a major motion picture. "She slept with a writer."

## 2.

**THE DAY AFTER I MET MOE, I WAS IN A CONFERENCE** room at the Monte Leon Hotel, shivering in the air conditioning and wondering what "Tango with the Spirits: Sex, Angels, and Avatars" would bring. Panels had been meeting at a rate of six or seven a day since the conference had opened. They had titles like "The Landscapes of Literature: Paranoia, Politicians, and Prostitutes" and "The Big Gap: Have We Created an Elite Meritocracy with No Audience?" Rosemary James, cofounder of the Faulkner Society, had dreamed up the panel titles and then assigned writers to panels, often not telling them which one they were on until the day before.

I was trying to get ideas for my own panel, the prosaically titled "You and Your Editor." I was supposed to contribute the writer's point of view, but since I had no editor, I wasn't sure what to say.

"Tango" got off to a slow start, with most of the participants admitting that they didn't know what *avatar* meant. Then panel leader Andrei Codrescu took the floor.

Leaning close to the mike to amplify his familiar Romanian rasp, Codrescu gave a complete and up-to-the-minute definition of *avatar*, including the Internet definition of a persona

you adopt to play games or post messages anonymously. He looked at his copanelists with disapproval, as if to chastise them for trying to pass off ignorance as a lack of pretension.

Then things got really nasty. One panelist said that not only did she not believe in angels or "avatars," whatever they were, but that angels in literature irritated her to no end. Isn't real life, she asked, mysterious enough?

A split developed between the New Englanders and the New Orleaners. Codrescu was in the latter camp, growling the virtues of "the city like a flower that never closes," land of ghosts, vampires, and women who spill out of their dresses.

Maybe he had something there. New Orleans' wet heat definitely acts as a sort of meteorological PMS, swelling the flesh and giving the city a hysterical edge. All my emotions were right on the surface, and the clothes I'd brought from San Francisco felt too tight.

A Northern panelist sang the praises of snow, straight lines, and Scotch on the rocks. Codrescu came back with a remark about Puritanism. This wasn't the first time the War between the States had been revived during the conference. It was almost obligatory for the Southern panelists to testify to the greatness of their region, while the North was evoked as a sort of anti-South, a pale, cold shadow compared to the South's steamy singularity. The West was mentioned only twice that I heard: Montana was "where the men dress like men, and so do the women," and San Diego was "the bland leading the bland."

*(end of excerpt)*