

PRETEND

Meredith Bradfield

I've never been that person on the street. I've always been that person in the window taking notes on the person in the street. Yes, it's true, I wear my pajamas all day and sometimes never leave the house, but I've got a noble calling. Some people save lives. Others fight for justice. I on the other hand, write stories. I admit it's not quite the same as running into a burning building or performing open-heart surgery, but it's worthwhile. At the very least, it's a sacrifice. I could have been anything else, if I wanted. I could have been a doctor or a teacher or a firefighter. Hell, things would have been better for me if I did want those things. But I just wasn't born to do any of them. Something about the wiring in my brain — I just have a desire to describe things.

For the past few months, I've been describing the life of my main character, Frederic Mouth. He wants to be an actor but his parents want him to be a lawyer instead. In three chapters he will run away from college to fall amongst a troupe of artists. He will experiment with recreational drugs and the plot will become increasingly surreal until readers can no longer tell the genre of my story. It will be fantastic, but I haven't gotten there quite yet.

At the moment, Frederic thrives in the sticker-covered notebook I keep in my satchel. Sometimes I think up his lines while I'm riding on the bus and occasion-

ally it'll feel as though he's there, sitting right next to me. Before I developed the secondary characters to his story, I used to think up his dialogue as if he was addressing me.

"Look at these people," I once imagined him saying. "I could be any one of them. Bet me five dollars I could pretend to be one of them and pull it off perfectly!"

There was a woman with a screechy toddler who was sitting three seats in front of Frederic and me. She wore a long, flowing pastel dress, probably to hide the baby weight she hadn't yet lost — we figured. The woman smiled oddly at everyone, her eyebrows scrunched together. That was when I dared Frederic to be her. And he was right; he did so "perfectly."

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Later, as I was perched on a curb outside of a grocery store, I narrated in my book how Frederic went inside with a different guise, asking a clerk for assistance.

I wanted to write about the subtleties that made him suddenly appear feminine, but I got tangled up in the definition of femininity and gave up.

In the end, I just skimmed over the descriptions and got right to the part where I paid him for his win of our bet. When I asked him if he felt dishonest about having lied to people, Frederic just shrugged and said, "It isn't about lying to people. It's about walking around in someone else's skin for a bit." I thought there was a desire to control other people there was well, but I figured it would be best to let my audience reach to that conclusion on their own.

Once I reached the end of my notebook, after having sketched multiple plot outlines and numerous background stories for some of the other characters, it was time to transfer my written work over to the monitor screen.

Beneath a lamp that was covered in sticky notes, in the shrine of my bedroom desk, waited my laptop. I knew that writing my first, official page was going to be a pretty big deal.

The difference between a published work and a work tossed in the bin, could possibly all come down to the quality of the very first sentence. I hoped that Frederic wouldn't freeze up under all the pressure. I on the other hand would be fine; I was the writer, I was in control, I was powerful...

I was hungry.

After making myself a grilled cheese sandwich, I sat back down at my desk to begin writing again. I felt great. My chair was comfortable, my room was at a perfect temperature, and everything else was content. I decided that the scene I would write would be with Frederic. It would be really witty, the best thing I'd ever written. I was going to be so rich and famous after I completed my story. Writing this thing was going to solve all of my problems. I just had to recall what Frederic was going to do in the first scene. And then it came to me...

At the beginning of my story, Frederic is at an Ivy League college. Was it Harvard? I reached instinctively for my satchel, but stopped myself from taking out my notebook - I could figure out that detail after the first draft. I just needed to know what Frederic was doing. I could fill in the rest of the details later.

In the first scene, Frederic is in the library, quietly studying. Nah, that did not sound like Frederic. No, Frederic was actually in his dormitory and he was... I couldn't remember. My idea, my vision, my baby... It was evaporating from my mind as I sat there. It was wondering out the door. It would soon enough be adopted by someone on the street who would make a lot of money off of it. No. That wasn't true. My baby was still there. I just had to push my mind harder.

I dimmed my computer screen until it faded into blackness. I was a laptop virtuoso. The continuous clicking and tapping of my keyboard filled the room. I was passing stones through the canals of my brain, but at least there was no movement.

Frederic said something. Somebody in his dormitory said something else. What he said didn't make any sense, but Frederic replied to it and it was funny. It was funny and it was something I had written that made it funny. The other character grew offended. They started fighting. Conflict is good! I made a note of that. Frederic was stupid. No! The other character was stupid. He was. He wasn't. He was. He wasn't. It was time for another character to come in and act bemused. It was a schoolteacher. No...it was the dean. What was the dean doing in his dorm? Nah, it was a prissy upper classman. Yeah. I was on a roll now. The prissy older student came in and called them both stupid.

My telephone rang and I got up to tell the solicitor on the other end of the line that I was a brilliant writer whose flow was just interrupted. I hung up. I was soon after that I decided on the way back to my computer, that I had been in need of a

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break anyway.

Now that I had fresh eyes, I figured it would be a smart idea to review my handiwork. I un-tinted my screen and read the five pages I had not long ago, written.

That draft was just a warm up - it was unworthy of being saved to my hard-drive. There was no need to beat myself up about it. I had to write another draft. I took in a breath and started the process again.



Frederic instead says something to his roommate about running away. His roommate starts crying. He then delivers a speech about why Frederic should stay in school. Frederic tearfully confesses his affection for his best friend but insists that he must run away. The prissy upperclassman overhears Frederic and the roommate, thus he considers telling on them to the dean. In the end, the upperclassman decides to let them go because he is actually a rather good guy and has been all along.

My room began to feel awfully dirty. I decided to break so that I could dust my blinds. Afterwards I read over what I had previously written.

So, it wasn't one of my best works of art. Still, there was a reason why it was called work. I would just have to try a little harder for the next draft.

On the third time around, Frederic tells his best friend that he plans on only going out for the night. His best friend knows that Frederic isn't telling the truth, but rather than showing how upset he really is, he chooses to act as though he doesn't mind, and tells Frederic to bring back a few beers. That was when the prissy one comes in and scornfully assigns them both chores, but they know that he just loves them both and doesn't want them to escape.

Pure undituted crap.... How could I for a moment think it was anything else? My brain was like a puree of half developed ideas and trying to shape them just left a residue of cliché's everywhere. Nothing was fresh. I could not be a master chef if I used only rancid food. I had to scrape off the disgusting mess into the trash and start fresh.

I got rid of everything. I tossed my notebook. All the pages I had written on my computer, were highlighted and then deleted. None of it was good enough to be in the canon. I wasn't good enough to be in the canon. At best, what I wrote could end up a fad. If I worked really hard, I might be able to improve to a mediocrity. I would spend the rest of my life writing real estate blurbs in a grey cubicle.

At midnight I sat in the same chair with my chin resting on my knee. My eyes felt grainy from staring so long at the white screen and that cursed line, flashing repetitively in front of me, as if it were flipping the bird. I wrote down Frederic's name. Then I deleted it. I wrote his friend's name. Then I deleted that too. I went back to staring at the screen.



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I should have majored in Biology. I should have become a doctor. I could have been like one of those characters that I saw on the medical drama shows, saving people and at the same time, making lots of money. I didn't even have to be a doctor. I could have done anything. I could have majored in underwater-hair-combing or something, anything else. Why was I born a writer?

"Oh listen to you - all misery!" It was Frederic's voice. I almost didn't recognize it. It had been so long since I had last heard him like this. I could sense that he was somewhere behind me, but exactly where, I was unsure of.

I told him I was giving up. The story was too big of a project for my level.

"I think you can do this." He was mocking me. I couldn't even see him properly; he kept on hiding behind other people's features. It was so rude. There was only so much of him left. But there was still his voice - at least there was still that.

"You're the one who wrote me." He said. I reminded him that I hadn't exactly written him up yet.

"Then what am I doing in all those notebooks over there?"

I glanced over at the trash basket by my bedroom door. What I had written in the notebooks was just for practice. That was all it was, brainstorming for the real work.

Frederic scoffed. "You know, I'm not so sure I understand the way this writing business works. Somehow, holding a pen and moving it across paper does not count as real writing, but staring uselessly at a screen does."

You didn't have to write to be a writer, I told him. That was when I got a brief glimpse of him raising his eyebrows, but his face soon again become blurred. I swore and then corrected my mistake. I had meant that writers didn't have to write by hand.

"Oh you're a writer now, are you?" Frederic laughed at me. I could see his shape in my mind. He spun around laconically in an office chair that looked exactly like mine.

Of course I was a writer.

"Don't you have to be published before you can consider yourself a true writer?"

That was a snobbish cliché invented

by established writers to beat back new competition. What is more, I said to him, it did not make any sense. You had to write before you had anything to publish.

"So, to you, anyone who writes is a writer."

I didn't like his description, but yes, that was how I felt.

"Then you're not a writer."

That wasn't true. I was always working on my technique. I always had a project. Even in the ones I didn't finish, I had written plenty of scenes. I didn't end up using them, but I still wrote a lot.

"But were you really writing if you had never finished any of your projects?" Frederic sat on my desk next to the laptop, dangling his feet over the floor. "Have you ever really written anything?"

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I had nothing in return to say to him. The inside of my throat swelled up. I looked at the white screen. Frederic moved my hand to the top of my screen and folded the laptop shut.

"Forget the stupid page count." He said. "Look at me."

His face had stopped blurring and morphing. His clothing had stopped changing. He was right there in front of me, smirking. Every detail was just as it was when he had first appeared to me, only this time his image was concrete. His thin shape and the shadows around his eyes gave him a somewhat sickly appearance. He had plenty attractive features, but they seemed inexplicably mismatched and out of proportion with the rest of his face. His eyes, for instance, were large but somewhat bulbous. Though his teeth seemed to be a perfect strip of white, his mouth was a little too big and when he smiled, in his customary sideways fashion,

