

## **The First Sentence** **By Matthew Norman**

Christopher Allison has written the same sentence seven times. He has deleted it six times. Now he's reading it over and over again. It is shit. It is completely void of poetry or depth or even meaning. Someone told him once that the first sentence of a story should summarize everything that follows it. He hasn't written a decent first sentence since, and just this afternoon he spent twenty minutes wondering what his computer would smell like if he set it on fire.

In his mind, Christopher has a story – a great story, a New Yorker story. It's about a man and a woman who are married. Through flashbacks we see that at one time they were desperately in love. But now, in the present tense, it is quite clear that they hate each other. Christopher has the metaphor all figured out. The couple, most likely named Jim and Tina, have two lovebirds. For whatever reason, these birds have turned on one another. Throughout the story, Jim and Tina fight and say horrible things to each other, until finally, in the story's dramatic conclusion, we see that one of the birds has at last pecked the other to death.

In his mind, his story is perfect. In the shower, Christopher can hear the dialogue; Jim and Tina bicker in his mind. At night, when he's trying to fall asleep, he can see them in their tiny apartment, most likely in New York, each moving closer and closer to a moment of revelation or drama. However, when he sits down at his computer, there is nothing. Jim and Tina simply disappear.

Christopher goes downstairs and gets another beer. Lately he's been drinking a lot while writing. He has convinced himself that drinking while writing will free him creatively. So far, this has not been the case at all. Instead he has written nothing and been at least partially drunk for 23 days straight.

Today, Christopher received two rejection letters in the mail. It's particularly painful to get two rejections in one day. It's as if God and the United States Postal Service have partnered to remind Christopher that he is wasting his life. At first he didn't even remember the story the letters were rejecting; it'd been months since he'd sent it out. However, like abandoned cats – diseased and covered in ticks – they have found their way back to him. The first was just a form letter. The second was the first page of his short story with the words “Needs more character!” scrawled across the top in red. This really hurts because Christopher knows that it is true. As hard as he tries, his stories don't really have characters. The protagonists are always just thinly veiled versions of himself living in cool cities and his antagonists are just unflattering composites of his horrible ex girlfriends.

Back at his desk, Christopher deletes the shit sentence and rewrites it again, this time switching the subject and the predicate. Still, it is shit. He thinks of Nick Hornby, the guy who wrote *High Fidelity*, and silently hates his guts. That limey bastard bitches about getting dumped for 300 pages and becomes a literary phenomenon in Europe; Christopher Allison bitches about getting dumped for 16 pages and is told that he needs more character. Fuck you, Nick Horby! And fuck you, too, John Cusack for starring in the movie version!

Christopher gets up from his desk and goes into the bathroom to look at himself in the mirror. He hasn't shaved in five days; he now decides that he needs to. Halfway through shaving, he thinks that it might be funny to see what he looks like with a mustache. *Magnum P.I.* had a mustache, and he drove a Ferrari. When he wipes the shaving gel from his face, he looks nothing like *Magnum P.I.* Instead, he looks like a thin, slightly gay version of his own father.

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