

DOVEL PROBLEMS

George Morrison



Jennin Books SM

Novel Problems TM

Copyright © 2020 by George Morrison

Book cover design and illustration: Andy Semnitz

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

First printing, 2020.

ISBN: 978-0-578-75466-6 (print)

978-0-578-75467-3 (eBook)

This is a work of fiction.

All of the characters and events portrayed in this book are either fictitious or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to persons living or dead is purely coincidence.

To Bev, with gratitude and thanks
for your endless patience and understanding.
*(When you finally get that dog you've always wanted,
I hope he's like Chaucer!)*

1

The US Government protects its secrets like a manic squirrel guarding its nuts. This was something that Jake Andersen failed to consider when the author, desperate to write a best-selling novel, borrowed one of those secrets.

It was midnight in late January when he made his mistake. Jake was alone in his cubicle, one of dozens filling a room dedicated to Northwood Shipbuilding's IT department. Pursing his lips, he leaned back in his chair and scowled at his laptop. His dark brown eyes normally glowed with the shy intensity of

a dreamer intent on bringing those dreams to life, but now they showed only annoyance.

The glow from his laptop's screen and the monitor on his desk barely lit the gray fabric of his cubicle's walls in the gloom. If it had been daytime, when the room hummed with quiet conversation and the chatter of keyboards, then the cinder-block walls would have appeared a dirty tan color under the fluorescent overhead lights. But they were invisible at night, as the room purposefully had no windows, both for reasons of security and to prevent the IT employees from succumbing to outside distractions. Working there was much like being the last passenger on a bus at night, alone, isolated from the world, and absent all sense of time.

Jake shrugged and zipped up his hoodie. He blew on his hands and rubbed them together to warm them before resuming typing. Northwood turned off the overhead lights and set back the thermostats in their buildings to fifty-six degrees at night in an effort to conserve energy. Located at the mouth of the Menominee River, where it passed through the town of Marinette before flowing into the western edge of Lake Michigan, the Northwood facility bore the brunt of the lake's winter fury as it lashed the Wisconsin shoreline. In January, the subzero wind coming off the lake chilled the outer walls to such an extent that the condensation on the cinder blocks occasionally froze.

He popped a handful of Cheese Puffs into his mouth, grinding them into an orange powder as the salty cheese flavor burst on his palate, then washing the slush down with a saccharine-spice slug of Dr. Pepper. The crunch of his snack resonated in the empty office, carrying further than one would have expected, almost as if the lingering scent of overworked staff and overheated electronics was helping it on its way.

Jake reread what he had just written on his laptop, and then he deleted it. *Complete garbage. Not the way to start the Great American Novel; better suited for an entry in the Stormy Night contest.* But he knew what the problem was.

I need a plot.

And there it was. Without a compelling storyline, anything that he wrote was just froth. But the ideas wouldn't come.

Jake sighed as he set his laptop aside, returning his attention to the monitor on his desk. His job as a UNIX administrator consisted of running a lot of batch programs to patch and update applications and to back up the company's files. He also monitored system processes and adjusted the priority of long-running jobs, ensuring that the company's database systems were secure and responsive. By its nature, the job had to be done when the systems were not in use, so Jake worked nights and weekends; a situation that suited him well.

With a slender build, warm brown eyes, and short, curly brown hair, Jake was an attractive young man in a geeky sort of way, although he was shy and lacked the confidence to ask a girl out. It was no surprise to anyone who knew him that he ended up working as a UNIX admin, a position where he worked nights and human contact was nil.

A tacit perk of the job was that when the systems were running well, Jake had considerable free time at his desk. It didn't take long before he started to fill the empty, unsupervised hours by drafting novels on his laptop.

Kicking off another back-up job on the mainframe, he leaned forward and watched filenames scroll down his monitor as the system sent copies of the files to a cloud-based repository. He was about to return to his laptop when he noticed something strange. The term "eschaton" kept showing up in the filenames.

Jake killed the back-up job, worried that the filenames were being corrupted. “Eschaton” wasn’t a word or technical term that he was familiar with, and a quick Google search only returned references to a Greek term heralding the end of the world. *That’s just the kind of thing a hacker would use. Oh, God, I hope we haven’t been breached!*

He pulled up one of the files and was relieved to find that it was still readable, showing no signs of corruption. *Maybe it’s just the filenames?* But as he read further, Jake realized that the term appeared multiple times within the document. It referred to one of the systems that Northwood was building into the Liberty-class destroyer currently under construction for the US Navy in the company’s shipyard.

He pulled up a few more files, and then quickly closed them. *OMG!* The chill he felt had nothing to do with the temperature of the room. Northwood was installing an Eschaton control system in the destroyer, and a cursory glance through the documents revealed that it formed the core of a ballistic missile defense system. An involuntary look around reassured him that he was still alone, that no one had seen him reading the documents.

Well, at least we haven’t been hacked. Jake restarted the back-up job, and then sat back to think about what he’d just read. The documents he’d viewed didn’t contain any engineering info or classified specifications. *But even so, they really shouldn’t leave documents like that lying around in plain text on a file system. The files should be encrypted. Heck, anybody working here could read them, and a spy would...* Jake paused for a moment. Then, before his more prudent side had time to raise an objection, his creative side came up with a grand idea for a new novel.

What if he wrote about spies trying to steal the Eschaton secrets from Northwood? But Jake was a sci-fi writer, and he

didn't want to do a Bond movie knockoff. The story had to have a sci-fi twist to it. *Aliens. Aliens trying to steal the secrets of our ballistic missile defense system in preparation for an invasion.*

Winters are long and cold in Wisconsin, and with no social life to distract him, Jake poured himself into his new project. Twelve weeks and one thousand, three hundred and seventy-two cups of coffee later, his masterpiece was complete.

Jake gave a copy of the manuscript to Felipe Ortega, his friend and roommate, for feedback.

Felipe had been a devout supporter of Jake's writing efforts from the time they first met in high school. Their initial introduction was somewhat informal, coming together while involuntarily participating in the swirly tradition imposed on nerds by the school's jocks. Swirlies involve shoving a victim's head into a school toilet and then flushing it. On this particular occasion, the football team's star quarterback had demonstrated a laudable commitment to water conservation by attempting to flush the heads of the two boys at the same time in the same stool. Because the boys were of similar build and hair color, the jock claimed extra points for the prank because they were 'twins.' Jake and Felipe soon formed a strong bond based upon shared misery and unfulfilled dreams.

Their friendship continued throughout college, where they both took advanced degrees in computer science. Recently, they found themselves both working for Northwood. As a UNIX admin, Jake worked nights, while Felipe worked the day shift as a web consultant.

When he wasn't working at his regular job, Jake would write and he had produced several sci-fi novels, none of which had ever been published. The two men had recently moved in together in an old, but well-maintained bungalow with white clapboard siding, two bedrooms and a shared bath that Jake

had purchased on Merryman Street, just a few blocks from where they worked.

Felipe admired Jake's writing efforts, and he loyally offered moral support to the struggling author after each setback. This hobby took up much of Felipe's time, as Jake tended to spiral into long periods of depression after each book was rejected.

The two friends were in the living room of their home watching a Brewers game on a lazy Sunday afternoon in early May when the subject of Jake's latest literary effort came up.

The room was like an old shoe, with a brown leather couch pushed up under a set of double-hung windows and facing a flat-screen TV on the opposite wall. The plaster walls were medium blue, as was the shag carpet. A box of pepperoni pizza sat on the coffee table in front of them, closely watched by Jake's chocolate Lab, Chaucer. The dog considered anything on the floor to be his property and the coffee table was low enough to almost qualify, so he lurked under it watching for a chance to snatch a snack.

Ignoring Chaucer's hopeful gaze, Felipe stuffed half a slice of pizza into his mouth and then washed it down with some Spotted Cow. Taking a moment to dislodge a scrap of pepperoni from his teeth using his pinky finger, Felipe leaned back on the couch and said, "I read your new book last night. It was great, man!"

"I wish somebody else thought so," Jake said. "Remember what happened to my first novel? One of the New York agencies actually went to the trouble of shredding the manuscript and returning it to me with a handwritten note saying never to contact them again."

"Okay, that one maybe did need a bit of work."

"And my second novel? Have you forgotten what happened at the Greater Chicago Writer's Pitch Convention? How that

agent had me thrown out and threatened me with a restraining order if I ever showed her a manuscript again?”

“Dude, I still think she was overreacting.” Felipe fished a joint from the ashtray on the table and lit it.

“And I wallpapered one side of my room with the rejections from my third book. I put up over three hundred before I ran out of space.”

“Yeah, but they didn’t shred it, did they? You’ve gotten better with each book, and this one’s legitimately great.”

“Felipe, you’re so stoned that your judgement’s impaired.” Suddenly suspicious, Jake asked, “Did you finish it or are you just saying that to make me feel better?”

“Of course, I read it! Well, most of it. Enough to get a good feel for it, anyway. Seriously, it’s great, man! I mean it. Especially where you have the alien turn purple when it’s in its horny male phase. Having aliens change sex based on the phase of the moon is pure dope. But don’t you think it’s a bit, well, clichéd to have it turn pink when it’s in the female phase?”

“Maybe. Would yellow be better?”

“Nah, I’d go with something cool, like black, or red, or black and red—you know, like a flat black with red pinstripes, kind of like a whacked-out zebra.”

“I’m not sure I want a horny, demented zebra trying to seduce the company’s CEO in my story. That’s not an image I’d care to inflict on an unwary reader. And now that you mention it, I wish I could get it out of my own mind. Ewwww! Anyway, since you didn’t read all of the book, perhaps you’d like me to read some to you?”

“Is that entirely necessary?”

“Well, no. But—”

“Dude, in case you hadn’t noticed, we’re in the middle of the Brewers game.”

Jake grabbed the remote and turned the TV off.

“Hey, I was watching that!” Felipe protested.

“Really? What inning was it?”

“Uh, the top of the sixth?”

“Nope. Bottom of the third and all the heavy hitters have been to bat and struck out. Trust me. You’re not missing a thing for at least half an hour. I’ll just read the first chapter. Then you can get back to the game, okay?”

“Sure,” Felipe said, chugging the rest of his beer to fortify himself, “but before you do, there’s something we should talk about.”

“Which is?”

“Jake, I’m not sure it’s such a good idea to use company confidential information in your book. You could lose your job, or even go to jail.”

“Nothing in the story is secret. It’s all public knowledge.”

“Oh yeah? If I ask the next guy I meet on the street what an Eschaton ballistic missile defense system is, what do you think he’d say?”

“Well, nothing, I guess.”

“Right. You know how twitchy management gets if you even mention weapon systems during a meeting. And talking about putting a system into one of the new destroyers that the company is building? Jesus, Jake, that’s seriously hush-hush.”

“But it’s not secret. At least, the bits I talk about aren’t secret. I don’t include any technical stuff or anything that could compromise security.”

Novel Problems

“Are you sure? And what’s this about a spy working in the company? How do you think they’ll react to that?”

“But it’s vital to the plot!”

“I don’t know, I’m not a writer, but the whole thing has a bad vibe.”

“How do you mean?”

“Well, it reads more like a spy’s personal notes than a novel. It feels a little too real.”

“Look, I wrote it like a diary in the first-person so that it would engage readers better.”

“Better than what, day-old cat food?”

“Felipe, stop already, okay?”

“Dude, where did you even get the idea for doing that?”

“There was an article in *Writer’s Digest* that talked about how to build interest in a story. Besides writing it like a diary, the author said to write about what I know. Other than UNIX operating systems, I don’t really know much. Heck, I get my butt kicked in fantasy sports even with a ten-gig database to help with my picks.”

“I told you the database wouldn’t work. How much did you lose, anyway?”

“That’s none of your business, and besides, we were talking about my book. Don’t change the subject.”

“Okay, but I still say it’s a bad idea.”

Jake sighed as he leaned back on the couch. “You might be right, Felipe. But I’m going crazy! I just can’t get anybody to look at my books. I’d do anything to get published!”

“Does that include going to jail?”

“I guess not. Maybe you’re right, but what else can I do?”

“Start something new that doesn’t include national defense secrets. And look at the bright side of things.”

“What bright side is that?”

“You haven’t gotten a single rejection letter for the book!”

Jake stared at his friend for a moment and then threw the manuscript on the floor in frustration.

“I could use another beer!” Felipe said hopefully as Jake stalked from the room.

When Jake didn’t return, Felipe got up and hit the kitchen for a brew and a snack. While he was out of the room, Jake’s dog Chaucer saw his chance. Slipping out from under the coffee table, he snatched up the manuscript and bounded out of the back door before anybody noticed what he was up to. It took only a few minutes for the dog to bury Jake’s latest manuscript in the vain hope that it would never be found.