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Writer's Block

By *Elizabeth Burzumato*

In a cozy little cottage, deep in the woods, miles away from the nearest town, the first hint of spring was in the air. Alba was snuggled deeply into her lounge chair under the window in her favorite corner, her laptop balanced on the arm of the chair, the cursor blinking tauntingly on the empty page. For weeks she had hovered her hands over the keys trying to find the right words—or really any words—to begin. Everything her writing professors had ever told her flowed through her mind like violent rapids.

“Write what you know,” one said.

“Use your imagination,” came another voice.

“Just start writing whether it makes sense or not; you can edit later.”

“Lower your expectations and just write.”

“Write the story that your mind is screaming to write.”

“Write.”

“Write!”

“WRITE!”

Alba snapped her laptop shut. It was either that or go absolutely mad. Not mad in the “Alice in Wonderland having tea with the critters” sort of way. Mad in the “setting fire to your lawn because you think the ants are plotting against you” sort of way.

She kicked at the pile of blankets that she’d bundled herself under, beginning to feel more smothered than snuggled. Launching herself out of her cozy corner, she tripped over a stack of books on the ground. After regaining her balance—not easy in fuzzy socks on hardwood—she turned to look at her corner. A large, red, wingback Victorian style chair with colorful throw pillows under a sizable window with peeling white paint and elegant white lace curtains. Next to the chair was an antique walnut bookshelf that she had stuffed to the gills with books. There was a dusty lamp in the very corner so she could keep reading and writing even after the sunlight was gone. A shelf up high held her three dripping pothos plants: Athos, Porthos, and Aramis.

She loved this corner, but she suddenly found her gaze had shifted. It all looked different to her now. It wasn't cozy anymore...it was suffocating.

Unfinished books were strewn about, covering the arms of the chair and all around the floor, reminding Alba of her chronic inability to finish anything. Countless empty takeout bags that had been her meals for the past few weeks littered the ground. One of the pillows depicting a shrimp saying, “you're shrimp-ly the best,” had mascara smudges from the time she had scream-sobbed into it. She tripped over the dirty laundry cluttering the floor around her. She looked down at her own outfit and tried to remember the last time she had showered—or even changed her shirt.

Her goldfish swam happily in his little bowl next to her bookshelf. “What has happened to me, Homer?” she asked him. He blinked slowly and then swam into his little Homeric galley-shaped fish house. He peeked his shiny little head out and blinked at her again. “You're right Homer...I think I have been inside for too long.”

Alba turned and caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror. She froze, staring at the stranger she saw there. Smudged makeup left over from God knows when; her long golden hair scrunched up into a bun on top of her head, dark and greasy from the lack of showering; an old ratty t-shirt and sweats; stinky fuzzy socks. She wanted to cry again.

She spotted a quote that she had written on a post-it and stuck to her mirror beside her old family photos:

"Either write something worth reading or do something worth writing."
-Benjamin Franklin

For as long as she had spent sitting in that chair and critically judging every idea that she formulated in her mind, she spent not a fraction of a second debating what she did next. Truthfully, it was less of a decision and more of a guttural reaction.

Alba ran as fast as she could toward her front door, stumbling more than running with socks on hardwood. She flung it open and winced at the bright afternoon sun. The air was starting to smell like spring, but that didn't make it any less cold. The spray of cold air needled into her skin. She felt absolutely euphoric. She couldn't remember the last time she had felt euphoric. She couldn't remember the last time she had...felt.

She took a shaky step forward before taking off in a full sprint. The cold of the grass and dirt that she ran across began to seep through her socks and numb her feet. She let out a hoarse laugh as she stumbled down the hill which abutted her cottage. Almost toppling over, she came to an abrupt stop at the bank of the river bordering her property. She looked up at the bare tree branches which wove together into a roof above her. Trying to breathe through the phlegm in her throat, she coughed and panted. Tears stung her eyes, and her fingers were now numb, along with her feet. As she started to breathe more calmly, her mind flickered back to the blinking cursor and the empty page on her computer.

"No!" she shrieked, clutching her head as if she could physically halt the thoughts in her brain. Then she let out a long, shrill, blood-curdling scream. It felt like—well—it felt. She was feeling. Alba could feel. She looked at the streaming water and a thought popped into her head. A good thought. A thought on how to stop all the thoughts. She ran, full speed, into the crisp cold water.

A thousand different curses came to mind as the glacial water instantly began to carry her writhing body downstream. She laughed maniacally as she clawed her way onto the river bank. The cold mud caked her body, and a rock stabbed into her back as she flopped down, still laughing. She couldn't stop her laughter as it streamed out of her very soul. Then the thoughts that had stopped for that glorious moment flooded back, and she gave in.

"Just write, Alba!" she shouted up at the gray clouds. "You're a writer! Writers write!" her laughs turned into sobs as she shouted all of the things that had been swimming around her mind for weeks. "It doesn't have to be good, Alba." Her body was shaking now, writhing in the mud. "It doesn't have to be good...it just has to be." She rolled onto her side and curled up into the fetal position as her sobbing turned into violent shrieks. Absolute insanity had finally set in.

Alba laid there in the muddy riverbank for an impossible amount of time. Her body was frozen and unmoving. She thought about staying there forever. She could simply retreat into her mind and stay where everything was possible and beautiful. If she kept her eyes closed, then she could live in a palace or on a pirate ship. If she kept her eyes closed, then she could read in a coffee shop while a tall handsome stranger approaches and asks to sit down. If she kept her eyes closed, then she could be a knight in medieval times on a quest for the crown. She could build herself a life and stay there forever. Her body would eventually expire, but she would be safe in her imagination. *'Just keep them closed,'* she whispered in her mind. *'Stay here where it's safe. Just don't open your eyes.'*

She opened her eyes.

Her breath caught in her throat, and she dared not move an inch. She was nose to nose with a large, hairy face. Sparkling black eyes, cool dark fur, a wide nose, and if she wasn't mistaken, a soft smile. She recognized the sandy muzzle and big ears. The creature lying mere inches from her was a beautiful black bear. Their eyes locked, and Alba tried to will herself to move, to run. She tried to think about what the wilderness guides said to do when you see a bear, but her head was empty. *'Oh sure,'* she thought, *'Now you decide to shut up!'*

The bear cocked its head, like a big dog that heard a squeaky toy, as if he'd heard her thoughts. The bear's big face was covered in mud and Alba imagined hers looked quite similar.

"Hello," she whispered. She had no idea why she was speaking. It slipped out of her mouth before she could stop it. The bear moved, and Alba shut her eyes, anticipating the inevitable mauling she was about to receive. Instead she got a friendly pat on the head. She squinted through her eyelids. The bear's paw was as big as her face, warm, and gentle. Instead of a mauling, she'd received a gentle 'boop' on the side of her face.

"Thank you," she smiled. The bear smiled back, undeniably. Its snout opened wide, and Alba got a pretty view of its bottom row of teeth. She let out a small giggle. Alba suddenly got a feeling like she could tell this bear anything. She hadn't been able to formulate the right words for weeks, but she knew how to talk now. She had an inkling that the bear would somehow give her the answer she was searching for.

"I'm having trouble writing...I can't find the right words, and it's killing me. I'm a writer...why can't I seem to write?" Alba waited. What was she waiting for? This was a bear; surely it couldn't understand her. The bear blinked its big eyes a few times before shifting its massive head closer to Alba's. It pressed its wide, fuzzy forehead against Alba's, and their noses touched softly. It was the most intimate moment Alba had ever experienced. She had never felt less alone.

A single, silent tear slid from the corner of her eye and forged a path through the caked mud on her cheek. She closed her eyes for a moment...just a single moment. Her body was so violently cold and numb, all of the physical pain that she had been unable to register suddenly hit all at once. She forced her eyes to reopen. The bear was gone.

Alba shot upright, searching frantically for her new friend. She stood, against the wishes of her aching bones, and spun around scanning the treelines. It had vanished.

Had she imagined it? It couldn't possibly have happened. There was no way.

Having absolutely no idea what she should do next, she began to make her way back to the cottage. Her feet screamed with each step. Her wet hair had turned crunchy, and thick mud dripped down her legs and arms. Her teeth chattered, and her hands were violently shaking. As she trudged back through the woods, she looked like a body that the police had just dragged out of a lake—she felt like one too.

As she approached her front door she realized it was standing open. Damn, in her mad dash for sanity she must have forgotten to close it. The door shut with a click behind her, and she frowned. The room was chilly now, not warm and cozy like before. Her mind was racing again, but this time she wasn't thinking about everything she had to write and all the people counting on her. She thought about the dark eyes that had just peered into her soul. She'd gone mad. That was the only explanation. She had officially gone 'round the bend.

As she trudged through her house, she suddenly caught her reflection in the mirror, and a tear instantly slid down her face. There, smudged in the mud on her cheek, was the unmistakable shape of a bear paw.

Alba choked out a sob. All of the horrid thoughts and feelings from the weeks before had suddenly gone. She closed her eyes and felt a warm wonderful place where she contemplated retreating to forever. Then she opened her eyes again and looked at the dirty, sobbing, mad woman in the mirror.

She gasped and bolted to her corner, leaving muddy footprints on her hardwood floors. She sat her soggy bottom down in her favorite chair, pulled her laptop onto her lap, and started to write.

