

White Rhino

The only sound interrupting the monotony of the ticking analog clock was the rain pounding against the window. Leo lay in his bed with nothing but his thoughts, staring at the dark ceiling made grey by the streetlight peeking through the shades. Nothing could stop his mind from stirring. Not the rain, not the ticking of the clock. The stress had been building, and tonight it was getting even worse. Leo had so many things on his mind, but there was one thought that he couldn't shake. The deadline. It was August 31st, and the editors needed a story by the following afternoon.

Leo had never struggled to complete a story. A creative writing student who had studied under the likes of Janine Gross and Albert Havlesham at New York University, he was used to getting his thoughts on paper and letting his stories develop into masterpieces. Even as a beginning writer for a small literary journal, deadlines were never stressful. Now in his new position as one of the lead writers for the New Yorker, something seemed different. The New Yorker was the cream of the crop for so many creative writers. The position may be different, but Leo thought he could handle it. Was it the anxiety of a new job? Was it trouble at home? Was it the fear of not panning out like so many aspiring writers before him? Leo didn't know why he couldn't write. If he knew, he would be able to push through.

“What’s wrong Leo?” his wife Anna quietly whispered as she shifted to face her stirring husband.

“This deadline” Leo answered trying not to convey his fear, “The editors need a story by tomorrow and I don’t even have the slightest idea of what to write.”

“You’ll figure it out. You always do” Anna said as she yawned and drifted back off to sleep.

‘This time is different’, Leo thought to himself. Writers block was a very real thing and it was attacking Leo with full force.

He slowly got up from his bed as to not wake his sleeping bride and quietly walked towards his study. In the dimly lit room there sat a lone typewriter and a desk lamp. Leo always loved this traditional process of composing a story. It had always been a kind of inspiration for him. Going back to the methodology of great writers always posed an exciting challenge for him. It helped him strive for a certain type of perfection. This perfection, seemed to be driving him insane with this story that had been luring in his mind for weeks.

Leo sat down at his quaint desk and slid a piece of crisp, white paper into the guide. He turned the nob to get the paper into position for what seemed like the thousandth time. That blank paper made his skin crawl. Something needed to

change... and fast. Time was ticking, and his typewriter keys weren't. Leo stared blankly at the blank sheet as the rain tried to force itself through the small window in the corner of his study.

I can't write with all of this stress, Leo thought to himself. I need to clear my head and get to work. This isn't some peace treaty that I have to draft, it is a short story for the New Yorker. It can't be that hard.

Leo arose from his seat and grabbed his long black trench coat from the hanger near the door. Slipping on his shoes, he headed for the door of their messy of apartment and trekked toward the elevator. A walk across the park might clear his head and give him something to write about. It was 2:00 AM and the city was no longer humming with the beeping of angry taxi drivers or verbose conference calls of stock brokers trying to make a deal on the way to work.

"Good Evening Mr. Davis," smiled the overly caffeinated bellhop as Leo made his way through the lobby. "A little evening stroll to get the juices flowing?"

"Indeed George. Big deadline tomorrow and need to get some air." Leo wore a smile that probably looked as fake as it felt.

The crisp, late summer air felt good against Leo's face when he traipsed through the revolving glass door. The night was quiet and the park was only a block away

from he and Anna's apartment complex. The flicker of the streetlights made his shadow dance across the sidewalk.

The park was empty apart from the homeless man sleeping soundly on the bench and the police officer sipping coffee in his squad car just a couple of yards away. Leo tried to clear his mind as he walked, but to no avail. His mind was still swimming with anxiety. Each step brought more and more stress. He needed to pull himself together. As he rounded a turn in the winding path of the dimly lit park, Leo reached into his pocket and brought out a small tape recorder. It was a tape recorder that he always carried with him in case a sudden source of inspiration occurred and he needed to make note of what he was thinking. The tape recorder felt heavy in his hand, almost like a foreign object. He needed something to get him going and maybe this walk and the tape recorder would help him get to where he needed to go. Leo looked at the cool grey tape recorder and pressed the red button to start recording. As the tapes turned, all Leo could do was stare.

And then it happened.

There was no sudden rush of inspiration or an idea of a story that magically appeared in his mind. Rather, his vision became blurry. His heart started beating faster than a racecar driver rounding the last turn at Daytona. Blood rushed to Leo's head and through his ears.

Thump... Thump... Thump...

His heart felt as if it would burst through his chest at any moment.

The crisp August night turned scalding hot and beads of sweat dribbled down Leo's forehead.

"Am I dying?" Leo questioned as he ripped off his overcoat, hoping the rain could cool down his sudden flash of panic.

His wife Anna had had a panic attack before, and this is what it had seemed like to Leo as he consoled her on the bathroom floor of their apartment years ago. Panic had almost ruined her career... and now it was time for it to ruin his.

Thump... Thump... Thump...

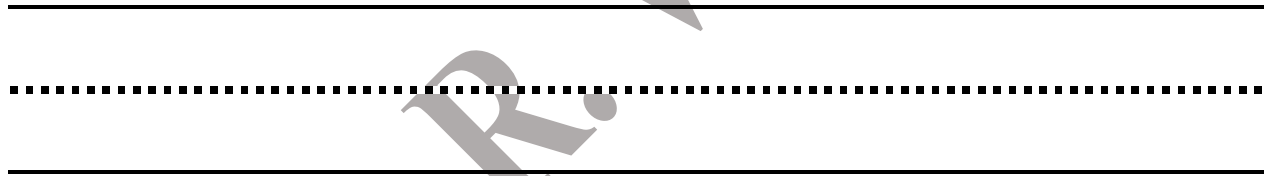
His heart was beating even faster, and the trembling he felt in his hands had moved to his entire body. His eyes felt like a kaleidoscope, struggling even further to make out where he was in the already dimly lit park. Leo tried to take a deep breath to calm himself, but all his lungs would contribute were sharp, shallow heaves.

“You’re dying and you need to sit down” the muffled voice of Leo’s mind spoke to him as he struggled to find the nearest bench.

He was having a panic attack, and he needed to find a place to lie down for a minute to try and calm himself.

Leo came to rest on the cold, black iron of the park bench and closed his eyes in a desperate attempt to subdue the tension in his body.

As he slowly closed his eyes and gasped for air, the last thing he saw were the stars.



Leo was transported to an empty field. Wind whipped through his ears and the hot sun beat down from the cloudless sky on his shoulders. He looked down and noticed that he still had on his black trench coat from the park.

He was completely disoriented. By the same token, something told him that he had been here all along.

*Where am I? What am I doing here? This isn't New York. I was just in the park.
How did I get to this field? Wasn't it just raining?*

Leo reached to take off his jacket and heard footsteps coming from behind him.

“Leo why are you stopping?” a woman’s voice questioned. “We are right on his tail and we can’t lose him.”

Leo turned around to see two figures, a man and a woman, dressed in tribal clothing. The woman wore a stern look on her face and carried a long wooden bow with a quiver of arrows slung over her back. The man seemed much calmer, but gripped a long metal scythe as his massive arms swayed with every step towards the confused Leo.

“How far off are we?” Leo asked, trying not to give any hint that he clearly didn’t belong.

“Only a couple hundred paces from here.” The woman answered sternly as she pushed past Leo and took the lead.

Leo turned to the massive man and lowered his voice.

“What are we looking for?”

The man didn't seem the least bit surprised by the question.

"We are looking for White Rhino. I am Ayomide. You, Dayo and I have been on trail for weeks. It will come up soon. We have little time. Come."

Leo instinctively knew not to question the man and continue alongside.

Why am I still dressed like I am on my walk in the park? Leo thought to himself.

"Because you are dreaming" answered the man.

"How did you..."

Leo was shocked. He hadn't spoken a word but the man was reading his thoughts. Leo needed to know what was going on.

"Why are we looking for this rhino? I don't understand why I am here." Leo tried to hide his panic as he looked up at the massive tribesman.

"We were sent here to help you capture White Rhino. White Rhino is very rare. Pick up your spear and come."

Well that really didn't answer my question

He looked down and saw a long wooden spear on the ground.

I guess this is mine.

Leo picked up the smooth handle of the spear and continued on with Ayomide.

The group walked along for some time. The tall, brown grass brushed against Leo's legs as the sun continued to beat down on his fair skin. Birds flew overhead scouting their next victim. A group of trees appeared small in the distance, the only hint of anything taller than the long grass beneath his shoes. Everything seemed normal, but Leo knew in his mind that it was very strange. He had been transported to another world. All for one reason, some strange white rhino.

The group came across a cluster of trees after what seemed like hours of walking through the field. Dayo took an arrow out of her quiver and locked it into place as if she was preparing for battle. The trio pushed through the trees and came upon a clearing with a small pond. It was a waterhole. Trees encompassed the pond and all was still except for a small ripple of the water. Leo followed the ripple across the water to its source.

The White Rhino.

It clearly had no regard for the three hunters standing just hundreds of yards away. The Rhino stood there, drinking water, minding its own business.

Dayo and Ayomide motioned to Leo as they began to circumvent the pond towards the rhino. They moved like stealthy cats, the only noise coming from Rhino in the distance and the ripple of the water. Each member crouched as to not give the slightest hint that they were approaching the massive animal soon to be poached.

Slowly, they moved behind the massive beast. Ayomide motioned towards Leo and whispered.

“It is your White Rhino. You must throw the spear and capture it. Dayo and I cannot. It is yours to take.”

Leo knew he had to do it. He didn't know why, but something about this dream told him that he needed that animal. It was important. Taking the spear in hand, Leo drew his arm back and hurled the long wooden handle toward the rhino.

A yelp pierced the air as the spear lodged itself into the hind leg of the massive beast. It crumpled to the ground in agony, showing no signs of escape.

Leo rushed over to the wounded rhino. It was still breathing, but there was no way that it was in any shape to get away. He had captured the monolithic animal. But why? Leo walked over to the animal's head and looked at it with skepticism.

“Why was I supposed to get you big guy? What was the point? Why is this my dream?”

The Rhino's eyes moved to meet Leo's.

“You have been chasing me for weeks. I have done everything I could to evade you but you finally did it.” The Rhino shockingly replied.

“Who are you?” Leo asked, his voice shaking.

The cold rain stung Leo's eyes as he opened them to see the starry sky above. His heart rate had slowed and he no longer felt like he was under a heat lamp. His black trench coat was strewn over him as a makeshift blanket shielding him from the rain that continued to sprinkle. How long had he been out?

“You alright buddy?” The homeless man Leo had seen in the park earlier asked him. “Looks like you had a little scare. Want me to call an ambulance?”

Leo looked at his watch. 2:30 AM. He felt like he had been asleep hours. It had been five minutes.

“Buddy?”

Leo looked up at the homeless man who was way too close for comfort. All that came out was a whisper.

“I need to go home. I need my typewriter.”

James R. Watson III