

The Art of Astrophysics

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Jasmine was a writer. It was what she liked to call drinking coffee, smoking weed, and learning to balance a lead pencil on the bridge of her nose. By this definition, Jasmine was a very good writer because she loved coffee, loved weed even more, and she could balance a pencil on her nose for hours.

Every now and then, when it was raining outside and nature itself made her high, Jasmine would sit in the swivel chair beside her desktop computer, open a vein, and create something spectacular. Sometimes, she would type for hours that passed like days, and she would drink a few quarts of java and pause every little while to practice the fine art of pencil-balancing. Then, like no time at all had passed, she would start typing again, slinging words onto the page until she lassoed the perfect one. Because she was a good writer, she would finish the story, print her latest masterpiece, and mail it away. Then, she would lean far back in her swivel chair, smoke the last of her stash, and wait for the check.

Years ago, before Fine Phoenix Press found her at that workshop, no one had expected Jasmine to become a writer. She looked nothing like all the great modern authors, plastered on the dull covers of mass market paperbacks and stuck on the shelves of mainstream sellers. In high school, Jasmine had worn her short, black hair in ponytails and headbands and obnoxious, purple hairclips. She studied daily and wore wide, round glasses and a stupid grin – not the mandatory seductive, mysterious smile found on book covers. Still, when she was sure that no one was looking, she doodled words into the margins of her physics notebook. Jasmine created scenes of forbidden lovers escaping to Paris, and then

with words, she etched descriptions of the rugged handsomeness of the French waiter that the woman would leave her man for. Jasmine enjoyed words, loved the way they felt, but when it came time for college applications, she carefully abandoned hope and penciled in astrophysics as her intended major. She was not a writer.

After a while, Jasmine realized that astrophysics did not have the magic she had imagined. There were no rockets or phasers from Star Trek. No aliens had stopped by recently to share the secrets of light travel, and NASA's hoity-toity reputation was crumbling. Astrophysics was a dying art, and as part of the living, Jasmine decided that it was no longer worth her time. Instead, she decidedly popped a purple hairclip across her bangs and went to a writers' workshop on the corner of Holiday and Fifth. There, she took a pencil and rewrote France. It didn't take long after that, and soon, Fine Phoenix Press swooped down from their suite in New York, handed her an acceptance letter and a box of blonde hair dye and rebirthed her from the flames of her old image. She bought a blank notebook, bleached her hair to look like the other best-selling writers, and tossed her glasses into the box with her last remnants of her personality. She bought long and flowing skirts that twisted around her thighs when she walked and suede boots that stretched up to her knee. Fine Phoenix Press smiled down upon her and pumped out copies of her dirty romance novel, *Bonjour to the Bulge*. Jasmine was now a writer.

Jasmine had been what the Phoenixes called a "good writer" – which roughly meant no hairclips or owl-eyed glasses – for six years before she received her first piece of genuine fan mail. It was from a widow in Connecticut, and the letter read, "I deeply enjoyed your newest short story, and I am very glad you killed Larry off in the end. He reminded me of my ex-husband." After that, fan mail poured in.

To cope with the demands and deadlines of the publishing industry, Jasmine always set aside some cash every week to visit Kenny down the street and buy some weed from him. Kenny had graduated from high

school a few years before she did, and he always cut her a break when it came to drugs. Kenny was a good guy like that. He understood how taxing the writing business was and graciously took her money in exchange for a Ziplock bag of comfort.

Two weeks before the release date of her eighth novel, Jasmine went to Kenny's for some much-needed stress-relief to cope with the upcoming hassle of book signings. She thanked him, slid her purchase into her purse, and began the walk home. Out of habit, she checked herself in the side mirrors of the parked cars she passed. Jasmine smiled. She even walked like a writer – chin up, shoulders back, confidence in the strut. That was the stride of someone on the New York Times bestseller list. Her hair, wild and free, fell in front of her eyes, but Jasmine kept walking through the curtain of blonde.

“They make hairclips to fix that problem,” said a snarky voice from the side of the street.

Jasmine stopped and tucked her hair behind her ear. Her vision always blurred at this time of night, and she almost missed the little girl completely. But the girl – no, Jasmine thought as she squinted, pre-teen – mewed a little, like a stray, as Jasmine passed and momentarily blocked the light of the streetlamp.

“You okay there?” Jasmine asked, ignoring her comment. She stepped into the shadows of a discount dress shop and saw the girl sitting Indian-style on the ground, a spiral-bound notebook on her lap.

“You were in my light,” she said. A police siren screeched from a few blocks away.

Jasmine ignored her. “You shouldn't be out here alone. Where's your mama?”

“Work,” she said. “She forgot to leave me the key.”

Jasmine looked around the neighborhood and frowned. “Well, I can't leave you here. Grab your stuff and come on. I live across the street. You can watch from the window for when your mama gets home.”

The girl hesitated for a moment, but then she got up from the ground. “You got any weed?” she asked.

Jasmine smiled. “None for you.”

They crossed the street and walked the short distance to Jasmine’s apartment. She slid the key into the door and held it open for the girl to enter. The girl pushed her way inside and into the foyer.

“What’s your name, anyway?” Jasmine asked. She flicked on the lights and tossed her purse onto the shaky kitchen table. It jerked under the sudden increase in weight and leaned grotesquely on the leg that was a bit shorter than the rest.

“Gracie,” she answered. “I don’t know your name, but I know who you are. I watch you go to Kenny’s sometimes.”

“You are too young to be worrying about Kenny and drugs,” Jasmine said. “Don’t you have anything else to do, like Girl Scouts or something?”

Gracie inspected the apartment’s living room and planted herself on the edge of Jasmine’s beer-stained sofa. “Girl Scouts are for tools,” she said. “I write instead.” She gestured to her battered notebook.

Jasmine sat beside Gracie and took off her boots. She propped her feet on the coffee table. “Smart decision,” she said. “I was never much into Girl Scouts either. I quit after my first year. I wasn’t good at selling cookies.” She paused. “I was, however, very good at eating them.”

Gracie was quiet as she looked around the apartment. Jasmine knew that she was not a very tidy person. There were unfinished manuscripts, empty coffee mugs, and roach clips thrown across the room. A pencil stuck out of the lampshade from one crazy night when she had been high and stabbed it after she convinced herself it had been singing. That had been a fun night. Jasmine watched the girl’s eyes settle on an open composition book with Jasmine’s scratchy script filling the page.

“You write too?” Gracie asked.

“Yes, ma’am,” she said, “but I didn’t start writing until I was much older than you are now. Here, read a little.”

Gracie picked up the notebook and read the first line. *Linda pursed her juicy, collagen-filled lips and batted her sensual green eyes at the hunk of a man standing at the threshold of her cubicle.* Gracie chewed at her fingernail for a moment, and then she set the notebook aside and asked, "Have you been published?"

"Loads of times," Jasmine said. She pointed to the wreath of pressed daisies hanging on the wall. "I bought that with my last paycheck. Some yuppie Frenchman made it."

"You must be good to get published," Gracie reasoned. Jasmine wiggled her toes in her socks.

"Yes," Jasmine said. She didn't hesitate, but her blonde hair bounced on her shoulders, as if the strands had a life of their own. "I am also very lucky, which is much more important than talent." Gracie grimaced, so Jasmine smiled at her and added, "Want to learn something that does take talent?" Gracie nodded, and Jasmine lifted the sofa cushion and groped around until she found a lead pencil. "Now, watch," she said.

She tilted her head back and dropped the lead pencil onto her nose. It wobbled for a second before Jasmine found her balance, and then the pencil leveled on the bridge of her nose. She moved her head like a snake charmer, but the pencil remained steady.

"That's cool!" Gracie said. Jasmine grinned and let the pencil roll off her nose and into her palm.

"Trick of the trade," Jasmine said. She glanced at Gracie's notebook, which the girl had stuffed into her schoolbag. "What do you write?"

"Adventures," she replied. "They're all about this puppy named Hector. He's a Spanish conquistador's Cocker Spaniel. Once, he fought a Yeti tribe in the Alps, and he's gone into space twice. If you send a camera up there, you can see his paw prints on the moon."

"Incredible," Jasmine said. "Do you have a Cocker Spaniel at home? I'd like to meet the real-life Hector. He sounds thrilling."

"I don't have a dog," Gracie admitted. "My mom is allergic."

Jasmine sighed. "I'm sorry. I wish you could have a puppy. They're the best animals in the world. Man's best friend and all that. What's your mama do?"

"She's an astrophysicist," Gracie said.

"Groovy."

Gracie went back to reading the draft of Jasmine's story. She read silently for a few minutes, quietly flipping the page when she had reached the bottom. "You misspelled humility here. You added an extra L," she said once.

"So sue me," Jasmine replied, and Gracie kept reading.

"You got this published yet?" Gracie asked when she had finished.

"Not yet," Jasmine said. "I still need to write the ending. Do you like it?"

Gracie ran her thumb across the spine of the composition book. "I think Linda is a b—h. Why did you even write a story about her?"

"Because b—hes are everywhere," Jasmine said. "I actually met this chick Linda on the subway. She took a seat from an old man, and the poor guy had to stand. I couldn't call her out then and there on the subway, so I wrote about her. That's how we get through life, you and I."

"You mean writers," Gracie said.

"Yeah. People should never piss us off. We're dangerous when we've got a pen in our hands."

"Or on our noses," Gracie said. She giggled, but the smile faded quickly, and she looked down at the manuscript again. "You are very good, you know."

"Took a long time to get there," Jasmine said. "Rome wasn't built in a day."

"That's what mom says when she's working on new Mars rovers and models of nebulae or science s—t like that."

Jasmine snorted. "We're writers. We make our own nebulae."

Gracie laughed and held the composition book against her chest. "I

like your boots,” she said, nudging one of them with the tip of her tennis shoe.

“Writers’ boots,” Jasmine said. “I need them for a—kicking.” She clenched a fist of her blonde hair. “This too,” she added. “Helps everything flow. Gets me in the groove of creation.”

“You look like a damn hippie,” Gracie said. “Mom would laugh at you and call you a homeless druggie.”

“I’m honored.”

Gracie stood up and walked to the window. “The light’s on at home,” she said. “Mom must be back.”

“I’m not convinced I should trust an astrophysicist who forgets to leave her daughter a key to the house.” Jasmine stood up as Gracie walked back to the sofa.

Gracie smirked. “I’m not sure if I trust a published writer who smokes weed.”

“A minute ago, you were asking me if I had weed on me,” Jasmine argued.

Gracie bent down to pick her schoolbag off the ground. “Hey, I’m not published.” She grinned and slung the bag over her shoulder.

Jasmine smiled back at her. “So being published gives me some sort of responsibility? I need to be a good mentor now?” She had meant it as a joke, but Gracie did not laugh.

“Of course it does,” Gracie said. “Who else am I supposed to look up to? The astrophysicists?” She fidgeted with the strap of her schoolbag. “How did you get to be a writer anyway?” she asked.

Jasmine stared at the roach clips and empty coffee cups across the living room. In the corner, there was a box from Fine Phoenix Press, and she could see the shiny photograph of herself, blonde and long-haired, with her seductive, mysterious smile. Jasmine suddenly felt warm as she noticed Gracie’s eyes were still on her, and the air around them became heavy. She met Gracie’s stare.

“Perseverance,” she lied.

Gracie seemed satisfied because she stopped scraping her fingernails along the seam of her schoolbag, and she pushed her own notebook a little deeper into the sack.

Jasmine walked Gracie to the door. “Come by anytime. You can help check the spelling in my stories.”

“I’d like that,” Gracie said. She waved and said goodbye, and Jasmine closed the door behind her.

“Perseverance,” she muttered. Outside, a light rain began to pitter-patter against the gutter and metal roof. Jasmine walked to the window, and through the curtain of raindrops, she watched Gracie run home. Her mother opened the door when Gracie neared the porch steps, and the woman’s lab coat waved in the wind. She gave her daughter a one-armed hug before ushering the girl inside.

Jasmine pulled her blinds closed. She crossed the distance to her desk and gently picked up a pencil from the floor. Perseverance, she thought. She twirled the pencil slowly, thoughtfully, in her hand. Then, with a smile, she walked to her sofa and sat down, ignoring the stash waiting in her purse. She didn’t need it this time. Jasmine reached out and picked up her notebook from the table. She ran her thumb down the spiral side of the notebook, and it click-click-clicked like a stick beating against Tom Sawyer’s whitewashed fence. It was the sound a hairclip made snapping closed. Then, as the rain continued to fall, Jasmine set the tip of the pencil against the page, and she began to write.