

## “At Ease”

*Owl Man, Heron Man, Russ, and Paco Take a Vacation*

**PM.** Paco and Heron Man were sitting at ease in a remote cabin by a remote lake in a remote forest near the Canadian border. They were waiting for Russ and Owl Man. The rustic cabin had been the location for an unsuccessful slasher movie filmed in the early 1980s. Critics said the low-budget film was a flop, investors were “cleaned out,” and reviewers said the effort might have succeeded had there been “more gore.”

The cabin boasted an old-fashioned telephone in working order, which began ringing frantically, as telephones will do, practically jumping off its perch.

“Would you get that, Paco?” said Heron. “I think I’m busy.”

“You think? Well, I’m busy too, Heron. You’re closer to the phone. You get it!”

“What are you so busy doing?” said Heron.

The old-fashioned, black Bakelite phone kept ringing, but Paco and the Heron ignored it. They both hated telephones, said they were “too intrusive.”

Paco asked Heron, “What do you think I’m doing, Heron? I’m working, writing you up. This is a perfect place to write. Part of the vacation, the relaxation.”

“So? What’s the big deal?”

“You’re the big deal, Heron Man. Do you think you can just come floating off the lake in a birch-bark canoe, flapping your wings like a ready-made? Without any effort on my part? No, I have to write you up! And writing’s a lot of work!”

“OK, OK,” said Heron. “But what do you mean by ‘ready-made’? A ready-made what? You make me sound like I’m a frozen pizza, or a set of piston rings!”

Heron Man was getting slightly steamed.

“No, of course not, Heron. I meant a *ready-made character*. You know? Like a cliché in *fiction*. But, now I’m not so sure that’s a good idea. You’re starting to act like one of those idiotic characters who muck things up and can’t think straight!”

“I thought you wrote me up to be even-tempered, cool and measured—for the most part.”

“Well, sure I did, and you were—for the most part.”

“But doesn’t this little conflict we’re having add some spice to your plot?”

Heron laughed, and made a grotesque face, as if wearing a carved wooden mask from an Iroquois medicinal “False-Face Society.”

“Did you say ‘plot’? You know very well, Heron, that Russ and I don’t *do* ‘plots.’ We’re *pantsers*. So, if you’d stop clowning for a moment, and take me seriously, as your author, we might get along better than we are doing right now.”

“OK, Paco, I apologize. How would you like to imagine me, then, in the here-and-now, as they say?”

“Thank you, Heron Man. That helps, although it does lessen the conflict a bit. You know the old rule: ‘Conflict! Conflict! Conflict!’ But remember, Russ and I take writing seriously, even though we just write by the seats of our pants, and—I’ll admit it—there is a bit of humor involved. A lot, in fact. But let me continue.”

“Am I stopping you?” said the Heron. “Far be it from me to stop you, Paco. After all, you’re the writer. I’m just a lowly character.”

“Exactly. And while we’re at it, what is this bullshit you’re giving me about being ‘just a lowly character’? I did not write you up to be whining all the time.”

“I’m so terribly sorry,” said the Heron, with a touch of sarcasm.

“Apology accepted,” said Paco, ignoring the sarcasm. “Now remember, Heron, for Russ and me, this whole business is what writers describe as ‘character-driven.’ Characters, you’ll recall, are ‘key.’ So, no more ‘lowliness,’ OK?”

At this point the phone started ringing again, still annoying.

“Forget the phone, Paco,” said Heron. “I hear what you’re saying. You want to exercise the *writer’s prerogative*? Fine. So, go for it.”

“I want to imagine you, let’s say, drifting across the lake to this cabin, standing in the bow of your birch-bark canoe, flapping your wings, when suddenly a dense cloud sweeps down from the mountaintop and cuts loose with a violent rainstorm that nearly swamps your canoe, but you manage to bail and paddle at the same time—a nifty trick—and you reach the shore. You’re soaked, of course, and shivering, but you’re safe.”

“Mm-hmm. I can do that.”

“Of course, you can. I just invented it.”

“That easy, eh?” said Heron. “Have you ever tried being a character? You have to do whatever the author makes up, just like that. No rehearsal, you don’t get to learn your lines, no blocking out your moves for the camera shots. No nothing.”

“You’re whining again, Heron Man. Remember? Even-tempered, cool, and measured?”

“Oh hell, Paco. You can be a real pain in the ass, do you know that?”

“Maybe. Maybe so. Sure, I suppose I am, but *what if being a pain in the ass moves the story along?* What then?”

“Well, you know, Paco, all this writer’s stuff is fascinating, but where the hell are Russ and his acolyte, Owl Man? Shouldn’t they be here by now? It’s getting dark.”

“You’re right. Maybe they were the ones that were calling on the telephone.”

“Paco, you know damn well that Russ and the Owl hate phones as much as we do. I’ll just step outside and look around. Do you think they brought flashlights?”

“Well, Owl Man for sure will come well-equipped. But will Russ? Frankly, I don’t know. But he does write with a Mont Blanc “Agatha Christie” Model fountain pen, so that says something. By the way, be careful of making grand assumptions. They’re dangerous, you know.”

“Assumptions about what?”

“About who’s writing up whom. You don’t think that only Russ writes up the Owl, or that only I write up the Heron, do you?”

“It might have occurred to me.”

“Well, you can forget that. Pantsers don’t like things to be so—”

“Scripted?”

“Very good, Heron. Maybe you have the makings of a— ”

“Writer?”

“How did you know?”

“I’m learning, O Master.”

“Well then, Heron, why don’t you just learn to hustle your butt outside and look for Russ and the Owl, while I start a fire, rustle up some grub, and put a teakettle on?”

Heron Man obediently got up, but slowly—to show some independence—and walked toward the door. Before he was halfway across the cabin floor, however, the door burst open. Russ and his “acolyte” the Owl came stomping in, both wearing heavy, oilskin

anoraks, dripping wet. Russ was carrying a heavy-duty flashlight that served as a defensive—or offensive—weapon, as needed. They both tore off their rain gear. Russ spoke first.

“Hey, Paco! Hey, Heron!” he shouted. “Where’s the fire? Boy, that was quite a storm out on the lake! Came up suddenly. Thought for a while our canoe was going to flounder and all hands—Mr. Owl and I—would go down with the ship, like Ahab and the Pequod!”

So far, the Owl was silent, preferring to let Russ do the talking. But Russ was starting to shiver, rubbing and clapping his hands as he looked for the fire and the hot tea.

“By the way, Paco, why didn’t you answer the phone when I called?”

Paco bestirred himself after the shock of their arrival and spoke.

“Was that you calling, Russ? You know how I hate telephones!”

“Paco, you can drop the *tele-* now. You can even drop the apostrophe. No need.”

They could have gone on in this unproductive way all night, but Russ happened to look around and suffered a shock of recognition.

“Say, Paco, isn’t this the cabin where they shot that old slasher movie from the early 1980s? What was the name?”

“The name, if I recall correctly, was “Look Under the Floorboards.”

At this point, Owl Man finally spoke up and corrected Paco.

“I believe, Paco, that you’re thinking of a different film. The one they shot here was titled: “Whatever You Do, Don’t Go Down To The Basement.” It was a mystery thriller, or tried to be.

“I’d better get that fire going,” said Paco. “Does anyone have any matches?”