

## The Damn Thing

On December 21st, 2018, the Devil stopped sending Anne Thorn ideas.

When she first got out of college, she hated all of the work she wrote on her own, could barely write a few pages before scrapping an entire concept. Writing was the only thing she knew, at least according to her English degree, and she wasn't even good at it. She was working at ChopRig, the hardware store—a job she barely felt qualified for—and in desperate need of something else. That's when she met the Devil in the bathroom of the Jersey Video. Now she was five wildly successful books in, and all it cost her was her soul.

The letter on the 21st came like the others. A black envelope singed shut with a heart-shaped stamp. She finished her fifth book with its contents. The next week—nothing. And then the next month. Eventually, she wrote back. Of course, the Devil had no address, so she left the letter in an unmarked envelope on her kitchen counter, and the next morning, it was gone.

It began like this:

“Dear Mr. ~~Mistoffelees~~ Mephistopheles,

I am writing regarding the deal we made on June 29th, 2014. It was my understanding that...”

She sent other letters, too. The last one began like this:

“Hey, Satan,

It's me, ya girl. How are you doing? I'm doing fine. Wondering what's been up. Let's touch base.”

It had been three years now, but it might as well have been a century, she thought, sitting at her desk in the little office space she set up in her cramped apartment. It was all she could

afford—she was successful, but she was still just a writer, for Christ’s sake. She wrote another line, doing her best to force an idea onto the page. “It had been four years since The Battle of Greensing.” She immediately ripped the paper from her notebook, crumpled it up, and tossed it on the floor, into the miasma of fiber that covered every square inch of the hardwood. Garbage. All of it, garbage. She leaned back, covered her eyes with her dark brown hair, and let out a long, low whining noise.

She had been to The Paperback, the local Jersey bookstore, earlier that day. It was a brisk walk she took whenever she tried to write, to help clear her mind, to generate new ideas. That’s what she told herself, at least. Lately, it felt less like a calming experience and more like yet another source of anxiety. Occasionally, someone would recognize her, and those exchanges would sound something like this:

“Holy shit, you’re Anne Thorn.” (Nice to meet you!)

“Excuse me, could you sign this?” (Of course.)

“Didn’t you die in a car accident?” (That was Steward Queen. And they’re alive.)

More recently, she had been hearing these statements a concerning amount:

“Hey, when’s the next *Patrimony*?” (It’ll be out when it’s done, I promise!)

“Been awhile since your last book, huh?” (Haha, yeah, I guess.)

“Whoa. I figured you died in that car accident.” (That was Steward Queen. And they’re alive.)

And why would the trips make her feel better in the first place? The New Arrivals, planted by the front door, were her worst nightmare. Look, Anne, at all of these books whose existences you are not responsible for. It felt like there was a Steward Queen release every

month. Like Steward Queen was just cranking out modern horror classics every time they took a shit. Why couldn't Anne do it?

On this particular day, someone recognized her within minutes, and she left immediately, without talking to them (she was fully prepared for the “Met Anne Thorn and she’s kind of a bitch” thread on reddit later; there were already several). She couldn't do it anymore. Not to mention she'd barely bothered to get dressed—an oversized hoodie and a pair of sweatpants were the best she had to offer these days.

She checked the digital clock on the end table. 7:30 PM. She'd been sitting here since 11. Usually, right about now, she would flop down on the couch with a frozen pizza and listen to archived episodes of BBC's *The Archers* with her cat, Percy. They were finally on episode 4,655 and things were really starting to heat up. The immobility was almost starting to hurt. She hadn't written more than a two-bit half-sentence in months. Even her blog, updated weekly for her entire career, was now collecting digital dust, neglected, along with the rest of her work.

She groaned and popped open her laptop and clicked to her email. The usual messages were here again. Six or seven questions for her blog, which would all be left unopened and unread despite promises to herself that she would get around to them. A message from Mr. Erickson; Subject: Notice to Pay Rent. This would also be left unopened. One email, at the bottom of the first page, did catch her eye.

Subject: Advice for a Troubled Writer

“Dear Anne,

I recently became interested in writing, and you are a pretty big inspiration for this. I have been reading your books since I was 10, and am a big fan, though this is my first time writing to

you. I write this e-mail because recently I read that the secret to writing well is writing frequently and consistently. I feel this is true, but I sometimes find it hard to motivate myself to get started on a project. I was wondering if you ever felt the same way, and how you deal with writer's block when it arises. Thanks for all you do. Looking forward to the sixth *Patrimony*. I'm sure you're taking your time ensuring it is your best work.

Kareem, 15, South Carolina”

Anne bit her lip. She couldn't remember the last time she answered a question on her blog, but something about this one put a knife through her stomach. Something was stinging the corners of her eyes. She opened a text post on her blog.

“Kareem,

It makes me so happy to hear that I've inspired a young writer.”

She meant this. She'd always wanted to hear this. But what else was there? What was she going to say to this poor young soul? She closed her eyes. She had to write more.

“My own motivation is such a small part of the work that I do. It is fans like you who inspire me to keep writing every day.” A truth and a lie. Sort of. “Your question is of great interest to me because writer's block is something that I continue to struggle with on the daily.” This hurt to write. “The phrase ‘writer's block’ is fascinating, to me, because it implies that there is a place that ideas and words come from. Maybe this is true, and maybe writer's block is what happens when there is, legitimately, something obstructing these ideas from arriving. More terrifyingly, maybe there is a point at which this place will run low on stock—a point at which not only are ideas not coming, but where they cannot. Because there are no more ideas. In any case, as a more experienced author, I am no longer able to view writing as a series of deliveries.

It might help more to see it as jumping into a dark pit. You have such little control over what happens during the fall, unless, of course, you find something to hold on to. That's probably the hardest part. In any case, I don't know what happens when you hit the bottom, if such a thing exists. I hope this helps, Kareem.

A. Thorn”

She barely had a grasp of what she had just typed, but she hit “post” anyway. She pressed her forehead into the smooth surface of the desk. “A more experienced author.” That’s a laugh. She sat there with her eyes closed for awhile before having a thought: *Maybe I should just give up*. Almost as if in response, her laptop pinged. She glanced up. Another email.

Subject: place where ideas come from

“sounds weirdly familiar

207-555-0152”

She furrowed her brow, and then she saw the sender. “[s.queen@gmail.com](mailto:s.queen@gmail.com)”

What the hell?

They met at Starbucks, because of course they did.

Over a grande decaf mocha, triple shot, Anne blinked at the white-haired person sitting across from her. She was still in shock.

“So... *Steward Queen* made a deal with the Devil?” she said.

“Sure. I got hit by a car, too. Nothing special,” said Queen. According to them, they met Him at a minimall in Sacramento in 1974.

“I—I’m not even sure what to say, I—I wanted to be like you...”

“And you’re not excited to find out that you’re exactly like me,” they said, placing one hand on their drink. Black coffee. They took a sip.

“But, I mean, you’re—you’re still writing, right? So He must still be... right?”

Queen shrugged.

“Four years and He stopped. Same as you.”

“Fuck,” she said, planting her forehead in an upturned wrist. What’s your excuse now, Anne?

Queen set down their coffee on the table.

“What are you thinking?” they said.

“That, I mean... I can’t really be like you. That I can’t write without someone else—or, fuck, without a supernatural force—guiding me. I’ve tried. I’ve *been* trying.” Anne sighed. “I’m just no good.”

“Hm.” Queen nodded. “You wanna know something, Thorn?”

Anne looked up at them. Queen had a sort of wry smile perpetually playing at the corners of their lips. Just like in the author’s photo, she thought.

“After I knew there wouldn’t be another letter, I didn’t write for... God, at least a year.”

“Were you nervous?”

“Nervous?” Queen scoffed. “Thorn, I was scared shitless. I was afraid I’d never do the thing I loved again. And what if I did do it again? What if I did it and it was shit? What if they all figured out I was an impostor? Just another hack with the Devil’s pen,” they chuckled, and there was a hint of sadness.

There was a beat between the two of them, the noise of the café bustling around them, completely oblivious to their conversation.

“And then?” Anne said.

“And then,” Queen echoed. They tapped the table twice with their right knuckle. “And then I lowered my standards.”

Another beat. Anne’s brain stopped, but the chatter did not.

“Sorry, you, um, you what?”

Queen took a sip of coffee.

“*You* lowered your standards?” Anne said. “Steward Queen? Scream Queen? The Darling of Slaughter? You?”

“You heard me,” they said. “I just stopped worrying so much about failing. I mean, not completely, that never goes away, but that feeling is helpful. I just didn’t let it stop me. I wrote the damn book. And then I did it again.”

“You say that like it’s easy!” Anne said.

“I don’t mean to,” Queen said. “It’s not easy. But if you were looking for easy, you wouldn’t still want this job.” They leaned forward, placing both arms on the table. “The Devil stopped sending me his songs, and no one noticed.”

“No one noticed,” Anne said, rubbing her temples. She let out a deep breath.

“Think about it like this,” they said. “The Devil was sending you plot points. That’s barely half the work. Who wrote *Patrimony*?”

“I did,” she said, barely believing it.

“You did.” Queen turned slightly away from the table and lit a cigarette.

“So—so, what? The Devil did this to... teach us a lesson? Give me a magic feather and then show me the magic was inside me all along?”

“I think the Devil did it because He’s an asshole,” Queen huffed, tapping their cigarette. “We’re definitely still going to Hell.”

“Yeah. Definitely. Whatever circle is for infernal plagiarists,” said Anne. She crossed her arms. “Why are you telling me all this, anyway?”

Queen took another drag of their cigarette, and then spoke.

“I’d say you’re due for another *Patrimony*.”

Anne laughed.

“Fine. Any other advice for me?”

“Sure. Write the damn book.”

Anne arrived at her apartment that evening and was greeted, as usual, by a sea of paper basketballs. She kicked a few aside and slipped her shoes off. Percy poked his head out of a pile in the corner and mewled.

“Hey, boy,” she said, reaching her hand down to stroke him when he approached. “Enjoying the mess as always. I got Steward Queen’s autograph,” she said, holding up a signed copy of *The Curious Incident of the Dog Unchained*. “Cool, huh?”

Percy cried again, rubbing his nose on Anne’s leg.

“Alright, alright, let’s feed you,” she chuckled, placing the book on the coffee table, swiping away a few balled up pieces of paper in the process. In the kitchen, she picked up Percy’s food, and then froze. On the counter was an unmarked black envelope. She sighed, filled



Percy's bowl, and picked up the letter. Singed shut. Why now? She flipped the envelope back and forth, as if its surface was suddenly going to change. She walked to her room. She saw her notebook on her desk, open to a blank page, a black pen sitting on top of it. She nodded.

She ripped the envelope in half and let it fall to the floor with the rest of the garbage.