

God Bless You, Mr. Rinsewater

by Frank Vander Rasky

Money is a leading character in this tale about flash fiction writers, just as Madame Petrushka might properly be a leading character in a tale about Russian ballet.

Once upon a time, on March 8, 2011, to be exact, there was a flash fiction writer named Rinsewater who had a novel idea — flash fiction writers whose stories were published by indie lit magazines must be paid for their work!

He believed payment was a mark of respect, and he wanted the emerging industry he was a part of to attach value to the work of its talented writers. He believed indie lit mag editors and publishers should distribute and promote flash fiction to a much larger consumer base, and not just to other indie lit writers, editors, and publishers.

He saw flash fiction as an exciting new genre and enriching literary experience that could be viably marketed to worldwide readers.

Rinsewater talked about starting a Flash Fiction Writers Guild, but flash fiction writers, editors, and publishers pooh-poohed the idea as the delusions of a dreamer. Collective action for the purpose of writers getting paid, and flash fiction writers, editors and publishers working together to boost sales and public recognition of flash fiction, they said, would not work.

Some even declared that flash fiction writers did not want to be paid. Remuneration, according to his most genteel critics, was not a

holy grail; it was a large bothersome whale blocking the way to cultural cachet.

His fiercest opponent was the editor and publisher of numerous online indie lit magazines. She had moxie, vociferous-ity, and was accustomed to getting free stories from flash fiction writers, especially those with an MFA.

Her name was Pepper Spray.

Pepper had a low opinion of Rinsewater. She'd read his stories at the flash fiction web community where they both were members, Fiction Why Not. He was, in her opinion, a vile mercenary pandering to publican appetites.

It was rumoured that Rinsewater, for decades, had earned his livelihood as a professional writer who, like, really, got paid. Worse still, he ignored the cardinal rule of writing. The rule was, as Pepper often told her writing minions, "Don't think! Flow! I never think when I write."

Rinsewater was riff-raff. It was painfully obvious he put thought into his writing.

She consulted with her F Why Not confidant, Giuseppe Percheppi, about what on earth they should do about Rinsewater.

"I don't know, Pepper. I rather like him. He sent me a nice note in praise of ads on F Why Not. As you know I am—ahem—a member of the Board in the capacity of—ahem—official spiritual advisor. Rinsewater has entrepreneurial ideas the Board can use. He has the knack of combining art with commerce."

"Exactly my point," snapped Pepper. "Rinsewater is a dangerous influence on unpaid writers. He's a capitalist!"

“Maybe,” said Giuseppe. “But the owners of the F Why Not Corporation need cash if our web community is to survive. One of Rinsewater's ideas—a hit with the Board—is user fees. He suggests administrators of F Why Not groups each pay an annual user fee of \$5 for each group they've created.”

Pepper Spray, who was the admin of five F Why Not groups, gasped. “That's outrageous! Five times \$5 is more than I've ever paid all lit magazine writers, combined, in my life! And five, as you may know, is an open, not closed, number.”

Giuseppe said, “Goodness gracious, that's interesting, Pepper! I didn't know you ever paid writers. When, and how much?”

“Never you mind,” snapped Pepper. “What's important is that we have to stop him.”

“I don't know, Pepper,” said Giuseppe. “I think Rinsewater's heart is in the right place.”

Pepper kicked Giuseppe in his wooden leg. “No...it's...NOT! It's his hand in my pocket! He's infuriating. I'm going to rinse that man out of my hair. Come on, let's go see him.”

* * * Rinsewater was in his study, reading. His writing desk was piled high with books. The names of the authors on the covers and spines read like this:

John Steinbeck, Vladimir Nabakov, Boris Pasternak, J. D. Salinger, Ernest Hemingway, James Jones, John Hersey, Harper Lee, Henry Miller, William Faulkner, Saul Bellow, Truman Capote, Bernard Malamud, Graham Greene, John Updike, Kurt Vonnegut, Gore Vidal, E.L. Doctorow, Anais Nin, William Styron, Umberto Eco, Norman Mailer, Salman Rushdie, Frank Vander Rasky, Kilgore Carp, and Joyce Carol Oates.

“See,” muttered Pepper to Giuseppe. They were standing at the open door of Rinsewater's study. “It's like I told you. Rinsewater doesn't support indie lit writers. I've never seen any of these names in any of the indie lit magazines I've read. But make a list of the names, G. Maybe I can get the authors to contribute stories to my webzines.”

Rinsewater looked up from the book he was reading — *Cyprinus Carpio* by Kilgore Carp. Rinsewater smiled, disarmingly, because when the occasion called for it he believed in adverbosity.

“See here, Rinsewater,” said Pepper. “We've come to talk some sense into your head. What's all this we've been hearing from you about paying indie lit writers?”

Just then Kilgore entered the room. “Oh, pardon me, Mr. Rinsewater. I didn't know you had company.”

“That's all right, Kilgore,” said Rinsewater, “let me introduce you. Pepper Spray, Giuseppe Percheppi, meet my new editorial assistant, Kilgore Carp.”

Kilgore said, “Pleased to meet you. Hope you know my name. I may be a minnow among men, but writing is my game.”

“Hmmm,” said Pepper. “Your name DOES sound familiar. By any chance are you related to the Carps of the South Hamptons?”

“No,” said Kilgore, “but I have relatives in the area — the Sturgeons of the North Hamptons.”

“Oh,” said Pepper, “the NORTH Hamptons. Wouldn't know them then. I don't swim with that crowd.”

“No,” said Kilgore, “I don't imagine you would.” Kilgore then said to Rinsewater, “We signed five more writers, boss. Just sent each of them a cheque.”

“Excellent, Kilgore. Keep at it.” Kilgore left the room.

“See here, Rinsewater. What's all this about sending money to writers?” said Pepper.

Rinsewater smiled, innocently, because when the occasion called for it he believed in adverbosity.

“Oh, haven't you heard?” he said. “I've launched a new company — CourageToGrow.com. It's an indie lit webzine and ebook publishing house. We do print versions, too.

“We pay our writers. And we package, distribute, and promote their stories to readers who are not indie lit writers, editors, or publishers. We believe in selling to a global audience, and making money for our writers and ourselves. It's a concept.”

“Hmmm,” said Pepper. “Courage to grow. The phrase sounds familiar. Wasn't it in your F Why Not story, What I Wanted?”

“Thank you Pepper. Awareness is growing,” said Rinsewater. “Now, really, you must excuse me. I have reading and writing to do, and more cheques to sign.”

“You haven't heard the last of this, Rinsewater,” said Pepper. “I'll be taking this up with the powers-that-be.”

Giuseppe said, “Goodness gracious, that's interesting, Pepper! I didn't know you consulted directly with God for indie lit advice. When did this start?”

“Never you mind,” snapped Pepper. She kicked Giuseppe in his wooden leg. “Come on. Let's go.”

Outside, Pepper said, “Damn! I forgot my purse. Wait here for me, G.”

* * * Rinsewater was in his study. He looked up from the book he was reading — *Doppelgangers* by Frank Vander Rasky. Rinsewater smiled, sanguinely, because when the occasion called for it he believed in adverbosity.

“What you said about courage to grow has moved me, Mr. Rinsewater,” said Pepper. “I have a story you may like.”

“Oh,” said Rinsewater. “What's that?”

“It's about the unknown romance between Madame Petrushka, founder of Russian ballet, and her much younger lover, Rudolph Nureyev. I tell their story — or should I say a series of stories — through love letters. It's a sure-fire winner. Five publishing editors were fired because they all fell in love with it, but the unthinking powers-that-be just couldn't see it. Interested?”

Rinsewater smiled, angelically, because when the occasion called for it he believed in adverbosity.

“Yes, of course. Do send me the manuscripts. But I must warn you, Pepper, that if I publish your stories I will insist on paying you.”

“I can live with that,” said Pepper. “I'll be in touch. God bless you, Mr. Rinsewater.”

She danced out of the room.

