

Pens

By Sam Healey

A pen arrived on Randall Price's doorstep at the start of the summer, just two days after his high school graduation. It came in its own sleek black box, inside which it lounged on an interior felt lining like a royal throne. Indeed, it was a majestic instrument, plated in gold metal that shone almost too bright, like mall jewelry, except the weight to it confirmed that the quality was much better. Shorter than an average pen, it was about five inches, and didn't have any gripping pads, just that smooth cool metal. By twisting the pen in the middle, you could make the point appear from within like a coffin coming back out of the ground. It swooshed across the page with an ink that was glossy and black like tar. Randall wasn't expecting this pen to show up, but as soon as it did he knew deep in his soul that it was always supposed to come, destined to appear, almost as though it was written in a prophecy. He had seen it before, of course. It was his father's old pen.

Instead of hiding it away in one of the two overflowing boxes in his closet where he kept all of his other pens, tucked away to never see the light, Randall rested it on the center of his desk. It was remarkably shiny; its golden glint seemed to illuminate the room. On sunny days, it could hurt to look at, and even with his vision averted Randall could feel it burn, somehow, on his face. Sometimes he slid it back into its box, but he always took it back out after the worst had passed. They were constant companions, Randall and the pen. He didn't have his job at Shaw's anymore, nor did he have homework for college, so he spent most of his days looking at the pen and letting his mind wander, though it usually wandered to the same place, a place it had visited countless times his senior year. Today, as always, he found himself thinking about the

pens and pencils behind his closet door. There were hundreds of them, maybe even thousands. What fascinated him was the idea that every last one of them had their own unique story.

The pink Paper Mate he had found in his calculus class one day must have documented thousands of equations during its use. How many times had it traced the tall “S” of the integral sign, sketched the graph of a fifth-order polynomial? The pieces of the Ticonderoga that he had found at the bottom of the back stairwell—what was the reason for *its* untimely demise? Was it snapped in anger after a bad test score, chopped for show by a laughing teenager with his friends, or simply broken for a lack of any discernible reason at all? And the gorgeous blue fountain pen that he had found hidden, certainly with intent, behind a pipe in the boiler room; Randall was convinced it had penned love letters for one thrilling, breathless month before the inevitable heartbreak of a high school relationship. Or maybe it had been pressed down hard for the jagged words of a barely controlled rage, composing some secret diatribes about parents in bed after midnight, when nobody else in the house was up. It was impossible to know, each pen contained a great mystery, and each mystery Randall had pondered at some point since that first Monday of October when the letters stopped coming. Every pen had a story, and the new golden one, perhaps, most of all.

Before Captain Price was re-deployed, he often sat in his study, writing all day long with the pen. He would compile great stacks of paper all over his desk, getting it so cluttered that you couldn't even see his nameplate. The desk was large, hewn out of dark oak into a beautiful piece of furniture that dominated the center of the room. He'd play jazz music or swing music on an old record player to get into a writer's flow. When Randall was little, he sat in his dad's lap and rocked back and forth to the music. Randall always remembered it being Frank Sinatra on the

record, usually and his dad would hum along to the song under his breath. As Randall got bigger he couldn't sit on his dad's lap anymore, so he got a little desk with a little chair and did his homework right next to the big desk. There was a green armchair in the corner that Randall always thought was yellow, and this was where his mom would sit and read. Sometimes she would make peppermint tea and they would all sip out of mugs that had family pictures on them. Most of the photos were of baby Randall. On cold winter evenings they would get a fire going, but even on days when the hearth was empty the study was a warm and cozy place.

Randall liked to sit in the study and write stories when he didn't have homework. Well, he tried to write stories, but when he put his pencil to the paper the words wouldn't come.

"Dad," he asked one day. "How do you choose what to write about?"

His dad set down his pen, looked down at him, and smiled. "I don't."

"You don't?"

"Honestly, no. I don't have a choice, what I write about. Every now and then, something just comes along and gets stuck in my head and eventually I just *have* to get it on the page or I won't feel right inside."

"I don't get it."

"That's okay, bud. You might someday." He stood up and ruffled Randall's hair, and they all left the study to have dinner.

Evenings in the study, this was their routine for years, until one day his dad told him that he was needed in the war, but not to worry, it was a commanding role and he wouldn't be in any danger.

"Besides," he winked at Randall, holding up the gold pen, "I've got this with me, and I'll write you guys letters every week."

That was seven years ago. Randall was eleven. True to his word, they got letters in the mail every week. They came on Mondays, unless there was a holiday, and then they came on Tuesdays. But at the start of Randall's senior year the letters stopped coming. His mom would wait by the mailbox every Monday and at first Randall did too, but eventually he got tired of it.

Instead he started collecting pencils and pens on the floor of his high school. Everybody seemed to drop them; he found them in stairwells and hallways and classrooms, and before long he'd amassed a large collection that filled up one box, then another. Randall made up all those stories in his head about their histories and their previous owners, stories that were as varied as could be but all shared the same ending, lying to rest for good in his boxes. The pens were all sorts of colors except for one, they were never shiny and gold, and Randall assumed he would never find it but kept collecting all the same.

Until it appeared, one month ago to this day, on his front door. It was a Monday—letters came every Monday unless there was a holiday and then they came on Tuesday—but instead of a letter there was a pen. Of course, the pen didn't just spawn out of nowhere like magic. It was actually brought over by a man dressed in a full military uniform who introduced himself as Major Pollock of the United States Army. His uniform had lots of stripes and badges on it, and this is what Randall looked at while the major spoke.

"Captain Price was an American hero," he began. "He, I, I, I—" he trailed off because Randall's mother had just joined them on the front steps.

"No, no, NO!" she screamed, and ran at the major, raising her arm as if to hit him, but when she reached him she instead began to fold to the ground, and the major had to catch her. "NO!"

Her cries became muffled in the major's arms, and Randall put his hand on her back, though whether it was to comfort her or steady himself he wasn't sure, and after he did felt anchored to her at that point of contact, a feeling that grew in intensity until all he could see was his hand—everything else had dissolved. Finally he managed to look up. The major's mouth was moving for some reason, and Randall studied the range of expressions that formed from this strange motion. He couldn't help but crack a smile—the man looked like such a fool.

Noise, suddenly, like he had surfaced from a pool of water, entered his ear: "... this," the major was saying, and Randall strained to hear what would come next. But no more sound came. Instead, he felt a prodding in his chest and he looked down to see a sleek black box being handed to him. He snatched it from the major and tore it open and his eyes were dazzled by brilliant gold. The major was handing him something else, though it was hard to see against the illumination of the pen: a piece of paper, words that didn't make sense together. At the bottom there was a signature that was glossy and black like tar, and Randall was sure the ink had swooshed across the page.

"Did the general use my dad's pen to sign it?" said Randall, an absurd idea which he said, somehow, before he even thought of it.

"What?" said Major Pollock.

"It would have saved you guys time finding another pen, I guess," said Randall, and laughed, and ran inside to the bathroom, where vomit began to fly out of his mouth into the toilet. He looked down into the basin and saw, impossibly, the ham and cheese that he had eaten for lunch, intact in one piece, with not even one bite mark, which was so incredible that he ran back outside to tell them about it. But the major was gone, and his mom was bent over the railing, shaking uncontrollably. He lifted his right hand over her back to comfort her again, but

remembered the golden pen in his left, and instead dashed upstairs to put it on his desk where it belonged.

“Dinner!” called his mom from the kitchen, and he shook himself from his recollection of the events of a month prior before going downstairs. She had made a big pot of pasta, and handed him a bowl.

“How come you’re making this all of a sudden?” he asked. It was silent, and then there was a loud THUNK as his mom slammed the serving spoon down on the side of the pot, and set her bowl down on the counter.

“Wait, Mom! Uh, thank you!” he said, but she had already left the kitchen and was heading for the stairs.

Randall settled in and began to pick at his pasta. When he had finished eating—his bowl was still half full—he went back upstairs, passing by his mom’s closed door before settling down in bed. The pen remained on his desk, and he closed his eyes to avoid its shine.

Usually he had difficulty falling asleep, but he knew he had managed it this time, because the next time he opened his eyes, he could hear Frank Sinatra. It was faint, almost dusty, like it came from a record in a different room, although Randall could never find the particular room that was its source. This was the soundtrack of his dreamworld, a world he had visited every time he had fallen asleep since the major had come. It was exactly the same as the real world: his house was the same, and when he left, his neighborhood was the same, but there was one big difference—there were no people. Instead, giant pens and pencils walked and talked like people.

Randall got out of bed and opened the door, pausing at the top of the stairwell to peek into his mom’s room. A massive silver Sharpie was lounging on the bed, as usual, and it seemed

to say something to him, though like the music, he didn't know how the noise was being produced. The language of the pens was harsh and garbled, and he couldn't understand it. Downstairs, half of a massive Ticonderoga pencil was sauntering across the foyer. It was always busy down here, in the dreamworld. Dozens of pens and pencils would stop by to visit, speaking their strange language. They were of all colors and varieties; once, two Paper Mates, one blue and one pink, came in pushing a baby pen in a stroller. The visitors always spoke to Randall, and he would talk back, but neither of them could understand each other. Well, maybe they could understand him, but he had no way of knowing.

In the dreamworld, the golden pen was the king, and every single other pen and pencil was one of its subjects. They came here, to Randall's house, where the golden pen lived, to pay respects. Today in the study, a blue fountain pen was bowing (though, as it was a pen, it could not bend at the waist, and instead leaned its entire structure forward in defiance of physics) to his father's pen, which towered over the room, at least seven feet tall. When Randall entered the room, even though it had no facial expressions, he was sure that the golden pen looked right at him. The blue pen slunk off, as its king began to glide toward Randall, making noises that sounded like harsh laughter.

"Get out of my house," said Randall, but the laughter only got louder and the golden pen only loomed nearer.

Randall felt his face redden and he screamed this time: "Get out!" The pen drew in even closer and Randall exploded into motion, jumping to throw a wild right hook into the upper portion of the pen, where the head would be on a human. Pain coursed through his fist as it connected with the metal and he crumpled to the floor. Looking up, the golden pen seemed to be a hundred feet tall as it stood directly over him, laughing loudly—by now Randall was sure it

was laughter. Randall closed his eyes, but he was asleep, and when he did, his surroundings were the same and the pen grew only bigger and louder.

“You’re not real!” he shouted to the pen but it was real, it was real and it was taunting him, delighting in his terror. “Wake up!” he yelled. “Wake up! Ah—aaaa—wake up!” But he would not wake, he would not wake, and “—ahhhhh!” he finally woke up and bolted upright in his bed. He was soaked in sweat, and he wiped his forehead. As he did so a speck of light caught his eye, and there, on his desk, lay the golden pen, in its normal size. He stomped across the room and shoved it into its little box before tossing it into his closet with the other pens and slumping back in bed.

It was raining a soft drizzle outside, which produced a lulling sound in the room. The clock read 11:03 P.M. His chest was still heaving with rapid breaths of air, and he sat up to let it flow through his entire body. But his head felt so heavy that if he leaned in any direction, he knew he could topple like a mannequin. As groggy as he was, though, he couldn’t go back to sleep when he laid down. He was balanced on a precipice between slumber and being fully awake, but try as he might he couldn’t fall towards either direction. Though it was now out of his sight, for once, he could not get the pen out of his mind.

Then it was there. His father’s pen stood in the middle of the room towering over him. It was huge, all plated in that gold with a big clip at the top, like its head. In the middle was the line where you were supposed to twist to get the tip out. Even though it had no facial features Randall somehow could feel its devilish grin, and indeed the way it glinted was malicious.

Randall slapped himself.

“I’m awake,” he said, but in a soft voice that lacked conviction. The giant pen, as it had in his dream, crept closer. “No,” he continued. “No, no, no.” The massive pen drew nearer,

making a harsh, discordant noise. It was right by his bedside, in punching range again, getting louder and louder. Randall drew himself into a ball.

“Leave me alone,” he said with a hoarse voice. But he definitely wasn’t dreaming this time—he couldn’t just get lucky and wake up. It was here to stay, and it seemed to delight in that fact, gleaming at a brilliance that was its strongest yet.

Suddenly, a bizarre thought came into Randall’s head, and he couldn’t help but laugh at its absurdity. Right as he imagined it, though, it played out in front of him. Suspended in the air in front of the gold pen—where a hand should be—was a miniature person, like the roles of human and pen had entirely reversed, and this person was being used as a writing instrument. Randall recognized him in an instant.

“Dad?” said Randall. He breathed the words in a faint whisper.

His father looked at him, a tiny person floating in the air at Randall’s eyeline, and winked.

“I’ll write you letters every week,” said Captain Price, and Randall realized it was a Monday. Then, just as quickly as he had appeared, his father vanished.

“No,” he said again, but this time his voice contained clarity and understanding. He was fully awake now. He wrenched himself from the bed, dashed around the golden behemoth in the center of the room, tore the miniature version from its sleek black box in a reversal of his actions just five minutes earlier, and sat down in his chair. There was no paper on the desk, so he searched every drawer in a frantic rush. He couldn’t find any, just endless piles of pens and pencils that he didn’t even remember collecting. How? How could he have all these writing instruments, and not a single piece of paper?

There—in the bottom drawer—a little travel brochure. “Seek the Amalfi Coast” it read, a relic of a family vacation that never happened. Randall slammed it on the desk and flipped it over to a blank page. His heart raced as he held the pen in his right hand with a writer’s grip. Despite the sweat on his palm, he was surprised to find that it fit perfectly in his grasp. He twisted the pen in the middle, and the point emerged from within—a coffin rising out of the ground.

“Dear Dad,” he began. His handwriting was scraggly, shaky even, and he paused. What could he write about in this letter? He glanced behind him; the gigantic pen still loomed over his shoulder.

Every pen has a story, and the golden one, perhaps, most of all. In the back of his brain, Randall could hear Frank Sinatra playing, and he knew that he had to write something, anything, or he would never feel right inside.

“Fly me to the moon,” he began. “Let me play among the stars. Let me see what spring is like on a-Jupiter and Mars.” He knew every lyric. They were as innate to him as breathing, and so too was putting them on the paper. The pen swooshed across the page, and the ink was glossy and black like tar.

Fill my heart with song

Let me sing forevermore

You are all I long for, all I worship and adore

In other words, please be true

In other words

In other words

I love—

He stopped on the last word, and checked behind him. The giant golden pen was gone, and he tightened his grip on the real version, the one he held in his hand, before finishing the lyrics. “You.”

Randall Price slept well, and didn't dream of anything at all.