

Zero The Hero

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When it was quiet enough that she could hear cats treading on the roof, it was time to get up.

Zara put the wig that Mum had left over her head. If Popsicle burst in, he wouldn't know that it was her, up late, being *pernicious*. *Pernicious* was why he held her wrists when she was trying to get away from him. That was why she had squeezed the broken turtle, to stop it walking around being *pernicious*. He wouldn't tell her how to spell the word, 'cause that was cheating. He wouldn't tell her how to spell *nonsensical* neither. Her tears were completely nonsensical.

She switched on her computer monitor. It glowed like a fridge opened at midnight. It sounded like some real old man had writ the short story rules, he used real stupid old people words, plus his name was Mr Gruer, which made her think of a bowlful of wet gravel. It might've just been a competition for old people.

She listened for Popsicle getting up to pee. Nothing.

She went to Facebook and read this thing Jasmeena Hahdi had posted about a short story writing competition. 1500 words, you had to write. In class on the whiteboard Miss sometimes wrote 10 Mins Silent Writing. She worked it out on her fingers... 1500 words was like a short book, like the Golden Books she loved that Popsicle chucked out. She liked short books better anyway; she wasn't allowed to touch the big heavy books. She counted up all the things she'd said out loud in the day and there was only eighteen. Most of

those were from her whispering a wish into a jar and sealing it and sliding the jar under her bed.

Zara typed W-O-R-D onto a white page, copied the word, pasted it, and then she had two WORDs. She copied them, pasted them, and grew four WORDs, then eight, sixteen. Soon she had over a hundred words on the page. It was funny, being able to grow words like that. She copied and pasted until she reached over two thousand WORDs, so that was cool. 2048 words it was, altogether. *Smiley face*. She had bloomed the story in eleven steps, grown this whole amazing thing from nothing and it was the very first, like one of the First Editions that Popsicle loved.

No one was still talking to her on Chat, so she squeezed her eyes like she was trying to force a poo out and then a story came to her.

'Zero the Turtle' by Z.O., age 36.

She started writing how Zero lived in a African swamp, but she used up all the Africa words she knew—hippo, cheater, swingbok—and she got the spelling of Zambezi from a Zambezi clothing store bag deep under her bed. She hadn't bought nothing from Zambezi (Sophisticated garb dresses the unsophisticated, Popsicle'd said), she'd just found the bag in a alleyway, to wrap her samwidges in, 'cause she never had lunch money.

Zero was a girl orphan turtle and she didn't know why her parents didn't love her. She was nicer than any gecko or toad. She was always nice to this one cheater even though it always tried to eat her but it couldn't 'cause her shell was hard. One day when it was real hot, Zero fell asleep when she shouldn't of sposed to, on her back with her belly up and the cheater ate her from the belly, but that was just the beginning of a whole adventure inside the cheater's belly.

Zara snuck a raisin into her mouth from her secret box. She had 90 words so far. 90!!! She put her fingers over her lips in case Popsicle heard her smiling.

When she really, really couldn't sleep, and the numbers on the alarm clock got real small, she stroked her wig and crept through the ink and added one last teeny weency bit to the story: After the cheater ate the turtle, he was full and he needed a nap, but his belly started talking to him and then every time he tried to eat or do anything, his belly would give him advice.

Then, to make it more valuable, she wrote FIRST EDITION on the front page, and dived under the delicious marshmallowy duvet, wriggling her toes.

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The sky was like dirty pale curtains. A yellow tree drizzled leaves like a handful of cornflakes on the court. Her friends didn't ask about the story competition. Even when she got one of the cool girls out in handball, there was something wrong about it that she didn't know, that she felt dumb for learning after everyone else. She got to the first square, but a girl whose shirt was the right size went, 'I'm zero. Zero's better than first.'

'Nah...'

'Zero the hero, first the worst, second the best, third the nerd.'

One of the other girls said 'I'm second!'

'I wanna be zero,' Zara said, 'I shoulda been.'

Then some boys came and told her her face was stink, so she spent the second half of lunch in the toilets, chewing her jam samwidge. She liked how the toilets were silent and empty. The secret rivers inside the cold iron pipes whispered that she didn't watch cool TV shows, had big shoes, they

whispered about the snapped elastic which didn't hold her socks up, how grey her white shirt was. She liked how the cool kids saved up their number ones and twos for during class time and all met up in here. Their wees was like pocket money that got you out of class. She liked how a fly landed on her and spent a few minutes stroking her hands.

Later, in class, when the late boys had come in and their wet leather shoes drying on the heater steamed the windows white, and the room stank of deodorant, the teacher got them all to write stories for the competition, and the teacher asked who wanted to be first to read theirs, and no one put their hand up, and Zara smiled sneakretly. The teacher handed round permission slips. A class trip to the War Museum was coming up, and they might even get a tour from a real war hero.

She walked home, dragging her bag along the ground. In her head she heard what Popsicle would say about scraping the buckles. Then she tried to do mum's voice, but she couldn't remember what it sounded like.

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Popsicle said his bicycle was really trying his patience today so she'd best not do anything to wind him up, like as if he was just saying what the weather was, Bit angry outside, don't go out. He rid real far every day and it made him go real quiet when he got thorns from the hedge in his tyres. Cars are for indolent people, Popsicle said. He used to drive to this job doing books for the university, after the merchant navy didn't need him. Then Mum had gone and the car had gone and the curtains got dusty and he didn't know how to iron her skirts and he always went off to poetry readings and book groups now.

Popsicle crushed his boiled potato with his fork and kept looking around and sniffing. Zara kept quiet in case he said something. You're not sposda talk over your elders.

After tea, he wrote a letter to the editor, and closed his eyes and thought about his novel, then he read her the Tripe that was on at the pictures. Films, he said, were nothing, they lacked backbone.

'Is that why books have got spines?'

'Har-har. 'Taking credit for others' jokes now, are we? May I continue uninterrupted? Attagirl.' Books were better because in books, there were endings to break the cycles. Zara pictured Popsicle's cycle wheels being broken. She made him a cup of tea. When his head tilted back, his snoring sounded like the vacuum cleaner when it got blocked. His gloved hands were squeezing *Great Expectations* harder than ever.

Heaps of people weren't Chatting to her, so she whispered a wish that she would win the competition into a jar, twisted the jar lid real tight, rolled it under her bed then added more stuff to her story.

Zara wrote how Zero the Turtle's friends all couldn't live without her, especially Zero's mother, and how Zero was the hero of all the turtles but you couldn't see it on the outside, all you saw was a shell. And Zero the turtle told the cheater to go and drink from this one pond where Zero grew up, and it turned out it was a wishing well. And the turtle told the cheater to eat the gold coins what people wished with and he'd end up full of wishes but he drowned 'cause he was too heavy with gold and Zero the turtle swam out of his mouth as he drifted perniciously to the bottom and—

Popsicle donged her on the head with a first edition he was carrying then wiped the book off real careful. 'Go to bed,' he said, with his words all flat and small letters, sipping tea from a saucer, 'Remember who loves you.'

Zara had 505 words now! She posted on her profile, 'I writ 505 words for the short story compertition! Kewl ;o\$'

She couldn't sleep straight away, so she had to be pernicious and sneak out of bed and put Mum's wig on and finish the story. It probly wouldn't be gooder than Popsicle's novel but she'd do her bestest. It took infinity years that night 'cause she wasn't sure if the cheater should live or not, like 'cause Zero the turtle swam down after the cheater as it headed for the bottom and told the cheater it would have to grant one wish for every coin, and that was the only thing what saved the cheater, 'cept Zero's wish inside the cheater's belly had been I Wish The Mean Cheater Would Go And Die.

She got rid of that bit. Then she put it back in. Then she printed her story and put it in a envelope. There was money in them old birthday cards that used to come from Mummy, that she'd always been too nonsensical to open, just enough for the entry fee. :o)

*

Felix Eric Roy Gruer's family had left him because they were selfish and more concerned with his library than with his welfare, and he was better off without them. Wheelchairs these days were easier to operate than ever. They'd interfered with the museum trust, and now they were to suffer ostracism. Most galling was their suggestion that he was passing himself off as having had his legs shot up. C'est la vie. He had Mr Wolf, now, Mr Wolf could be trusted, and there was also his helper-man, the factotum, the gopher.

In spite of their past together, due to his employ, Mr Gruer had ruled that a helper could no longer be a mate; 'mates' were the most likely to rip you off. The helper had to wheel Gruer around the network of ramps and planks lain

through the property. The not insignificant matter of an outstanding loan kept the helper bonded to him. To be an owner oneself is to lower oneself, Mr Gruer had to remind the man. Mr Gruer actually rather appreciated having a moving target to practise his airgun on. It made Mr Gruer's days that much spicier, when the helper would pedal across the lawn, wiping midges from his glasses, and Gruer would pop a shot off and chuckle until the medals would rattle on his blazer and he'd have to have a nip of oxygen from his mask. Yes, life had its rewards, especially the arrival of new things to kill each season: bees, hedgehogs, borer, cabbage moths, what have you. He grew a boxthorn hedge which popped the neighbours' brats' balloons. Once, like an early birthday present, Mr Gruer had witnessed the neighbours' Jack Russell trapped in the hedge. He'd telephoned the Police to report a theft. The dog had *his* fish hook in its lips.

Mr Gruer had resolved to dedicate himself to the promotion and philanthropy of fine fiction, resourced with a library of first editions almost unrivalled within the province. *Almost*. He would enlighten his community with his inaugural short story competition and a generous prize. He was an exceedingly talented writer, but he wouldn't even enter this competition himself, to give others a fighting chance. The prize money was nothing—it was the prestige of having Mr Gruer digest your work which would bring admirers to him. He sent advertisements around the local schools, for their benefit.

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Popsicle left for the book fair. He said it would be three days in a row and Zara needed to brush her teeth twice a day as he'd hardly see her, due to getting back late. She did brush her teeth, and she did try and pace her reading and not to

over-indulge, but by Sunday she'd read everything she'd borrowed from the library and finished the dishes and sat under the kitchen table and cried.

Popsicle's mobile phone number was written with the emergency numbers. The buttons on the phone were real hard to press 'cause the phone was hardly ever used.

He found her on the kitchen floor with her head between her knees. She told him about the competition and he snorted and got out his hanky, but he didn't blow his nose, he wiped her eyes instead and she didn't even care if there were bogies on the hanky. His sleeves were wet and stinky. She said she'd writ almost 1000 words all by herself. He squeezed her head and she listened to his belly purr, like the car window rumbling against her skull as Popsicle read and mum drove them humming towards the holidays, away from the clinic.

You would've had a little sister to play with, Popsicle told her from out of nowhere, But her skull was too soft.

'Like a turtle egg?'

'I haven't seen a turtle's egg so I'm afraid I can't answer that in truth.'

'We got one in Science.'

'Listen, you were my first,' he said, 'And that makes you unique.' With his eyes closed, he took a long, deep sniff of her hair, licked his moustache then told her to finish her story. She was even allowed to print it from his colour printer. There was one last thing she had to change—she made the author Zara O'Shaughnessy, her real actual name, 'cause she didn't want to go around being sneaky. She wasn't gonna win the five hundred anyway.

He gave her a stamp to put on the envelope, and said he wouldn't charge her for the printing. She noticed weird paint on his fingernails. She didn't know they done painting at book thingies. He said he did some work while he was away

at the book fair—well, mostly he worked. All three days, actually. He told her his boss loved books, too, and that was the only thing which was keeping him from being sacked. He'd even begun helping read some short stories for his boss's competition. :o)

*

Gruer was absolutely disgusted that the neighbours hadn't invited him to their barbecue. Its insidious charcoal tang seethed under the door of his study and irritated his nostrils. They were deliberately aiming the smell at him, presumably by employing a large fan and a series of extension cords. He'd have the helper take photographs and be in touch with his barrister once the short story competition was out of the way.

It seemed that a classful of children had entered his competition. He delegated those entries to the helper, who seemed perpetually to have them tucked in his backpack. Nobody thanked Ol' Felix Gruer for his time, but nevertheless, he surrendered himself to the task of trying to narrow down a winner. Had Alfred Nobel dillied or dallied when bequeathing the Nobel Prize? Had Jesus complained about the march to Golgotha?

He opened the top drawer of his desk and pulled out the tablet on which he recorded Owesies. This "winner" would certainly owe him. He reviewed the debt owed by his helper, too, and compounded this month's interest, while he hacked into a couple of kippers. They used to say the protein could strengthen his wasted legs, they did.

Mr Gruer regretted having offered five hundred as prize money. His finances were a dying star hardening into a black hole. He was racing against time to renovate this mansion

and up its value, plum and ready for Mr Wolf to take ownership when Mr Gruer passed on.

Usually he didn't pay the helper, and instead would generously let the man choose a valuable book to take home as recompense. Mr Gruer often wondered what the helper told his family. Such deceit! Could the man really be trusted to help with the National Short Story Competition?

He was compiling the entries into a book, which he would print and sell to each entrant to redeem his expenses—entrants couldn't discover if they'd been included without purchasing a copy, see. In the foreword of the book, Mr Gruer pointed out how many times he'd been jabbed by staples as he compiled it. *The entry fees barely covered the prize money*, he wrote, *But ho hum, I do what I do for love and I shall suffer for the sake of art*. Perhaps he'd throw his hands up and allow the helper to choose a winner.

Mr Gruer kept his piss saved in jam jars, so that the sanitation department wouldn't steal his DNA, and it was the helper's job to transfer the waste from his stomach bag to the jars. He drew up a template letter for each entrant. From an open jar, Mr Gruer flecked droplets onto each letter. Being deprived of five hundred in prize money was going to make things mightily hard come Christmas, *but don't worry _____*, the template letter said, *Think not of less advantaged people than yourself. Vouchsafe your generation and the cult of the individual*.

Enjoy it while it lasts,

F.E.R. Gruer.

As he bullied his wheels across the wide wooden floor of the study, he smashed his elbow against the door frame. He wheeled backwards too hard, kicked his feet and the ceiling tipped. Now there was a wall in front of him and the floor cold against his cheek.

He yelled for aid, and heard his own voice unsettling the dust. He noticed through his wet eyes that the skirting board needed varnishing. His war shells, precious, precious, resting on the bottom shelf, gleamed at him. Mr Wolf waddled over to him, gold tags rattling, and licked his tears. The ceiling was far away. He watched the piss-puddle creep across the floor. He had to angle his face upward so that the piss wouldn't go up his nose. His white nostrils flickered and his eyes watered.

The helper found his boss lying on his side, pinning his own arm. Once righted, Fraser Gruer demanded to be wheeled outside so that his sticky legs could dry in the sun.

'Now bugger off home,' he growled.

'The exterior though, we can't stuff about with applying the second coat and—'

The helper's bicycle was parked on the porch. Mr Gruer rammed the bike's rear wheel, breaking a spoke.

'Buzz off!' Mr Gruer's chin was wet with spittle. 'And choose a bloody winner for the short story comp! Any damned story!' Mr Gruer proffered to his helper the envelope containing prize money and letter and bill for the printing of the story compilation. He held onto the envelope a little too long, and then released it.

*

Popsicle crossed the floor in one stride and swatted her ear with an envelope. He was chewing toast and thinking so hard he'd forgotten to take the bicycle clips around his ankles off. The letter was signed by the Competition Man himself. The news knocked on her brain door for ages before she let it enter.

'Well?' Popsicle said.

It said Zara had constructed a chilling tale told from the point of view of a little girl with domestic malaise, escaping

to a fantasy world—clearly an homage to *Alice In Wonderland*, mixed with Dickensian references, a little Dahl, McEwan and Sendak. All in all, the letter of congratulations listed 26 authors whom Zara’s writing was der—deri—

‘Popsicle, what does deri-vative mean?’

‘Cheating. Copying. Or mere unoriginality. Please tell me you didn’t cheat.’

‘It goes how I won the National Short Story Competition. It says I got five hundred bob! What’s bob? Who’s the person on this note? Can I keep it?’

Popsicle wiped his glasses clean and read the letter like it was a zero edition. ‘Well.’ He handed the letter back and tickled her cheek with his moustache with a kiss hidden under it.

*

At school the next day, she bought crisps and bottles of Coke for all the girls.

You owned that competition, they kept saying, You go girl! Between morning play and lunch, they became BFFs. They weaved friendship bracelets with flax and strands of her hair. She would buy them stuff forever! The tuck shop change came in gold coins and it made her skirt heavy. It was the best day of her whole entire life, even better than the day she got the turtle. That had been her First Bestest Day, but this one was her Zero Bestest day.

And the next days kept getting better. The more money she gave out, the better everything got. She kept wondering if it was a dream, how Popsicle had come into her room when only the stars were awake and given her a tickle-kiss and whispered in her ear how she should make the most of the five hundred. It was probly just a dream.

Mr Gruer drafted a letter in his brain while the helper drove him back from the Small Claims Court. The neighbours arrived home at the same time. Mr Gruer would need some extra dosh for the dispute regarding the thorny hedge, as his legal aid grant was running shallow. He needed his prize money back. Without the prize money, he couldn't afford to keep the helper on to sign the affidavit that—

Where had the blighter got to? Probably fondling first editions which he had no right to. Some helper, he was.

He wheeled excitedly into his study, blood full of urine, head full of caustic words, pausing briefly to stroke the spines of his first editions. He drew up a letter to that Zara woman, politely requesting the urgent return of his prize money.

Then he screwed up that letter and wrote a more deserving one. He called the woman a Nothing, a Nobody, a Nadir.

He then drew up another letter, more civil, more likely to yield the return of his money. In his restrained letter, he reminded the prize-thief that her use of the voice of a ten-year-old girl had been done by Twain, Harper Lee, not to mention O. Henry; essentially it had been a mistake to make her feel worthy of recognition. He was hereby giving her notice that he was considering litigation to recover the prize money.

He took a gulp of gin, grimaced, sealed the envelope, pushed the letter away and closed his eyes to calm himself in the pond of history. He was under the nosy sun, which baked his skin to leather, as he approached Singapore on the bow of a frigate scabbed with guano. He was tossing rare books into the sea, to drown with the jellyfish, rather than have Customs confiscate them. Those ingrates should have

appreciated that it had been generous of him to enlist, considering his Condition. He could have lived off of his estate if he'd had the inclination, but he was made of stronger stuff. It was essential that he thanklessly serve his country.

He felt the books condense in the pressurised depths, their value compressed infinitesimally, into priceless nothingness. If two copies of a text are worth a lot, and just one copy is worth more than that, then zero copies can only be worth—

Then, eyes open, feeling redeemed, Mr Gruer fetched the telephone. Excitedly, he informed his helper that the man wasn't needed any more, now that a fresh five hundred was coming his way, but before the helper could leave his employ, he required another few hundred empty jam jars, and there was a letter needing posted.

*

When Popsicle biked up the driveway, midges spattering on his glasses, Zara was on the porch holding a letter in her hands, glowing white. It looked like bees had stung her eyelids. Popsicle wheeled his bike to the garage and took a deep suck on his inhaler. He adjusted his glasses then read the letter standing up real straight, shaking the letter like it was biting him.

'He goes how I don't deserve it. He wants me to send him back the money. But I don't haaaave iiiit.'

Popsicle put his hand on the back of his neck and stared upwards. He licked his thumb, pulled a coin bag from his pocket and handed it to Zara.

'The fee for your field trip to the War Memorial Museum. I've signed the requisite form.'

Zara sniffed and nodded and clutched the money.

‘You didn’t lie on your entry form, I trust? Zara? You didn’t mislead the judges?’ Zara pulled her jersey up over her face, burying her head. She snorted runny bogies back up her nose. ‘I suppose I’d best talk to the man. There anything else I need to know before I ring, hmm?’ He shook her shoulders. ‘Anything?’

Zara hid behind a curtain as her Popsicle rang Mr Gruer. The curtain was a shell. From the way Popsicle held the phone away from his ear and squinted, it sounded more like the man had rung Popsicle, instead of Popsicle ringing the man. Popsicle said, ‘Yes, I see... I’ll let her know... I do apologise,’ and ‘I suppose I can get it in the post by six, presumably a cheque will suffice,’ and then there was a loud ringing in Zara’s ears, but she still heard him go, ‘I understand that’s contingent upon the recovery of the prize money, absolutely, not a problem. Thank you for your time, sir.’

*

Before first period, the girls crowded her and hit her sides like bumper cars. They asked what she got up to after school yesterday afternoon—True, girlfriend? They plaited her hair.

At morning play, the stream of girls gushed towards the tuck shop. They flanked her to the window.

‘What can I get for \$2.30?’

Jasmeena Hahdi said, ‘*WTF?*’

‘I almost run out of money. I had to send it back to the Competition Guy.’

‘But I’m *starving*.’ Some of the other girls said, ‘Mm, she is.’

At lunch time, they moved too fast for her, and she had to run to catch them up. One of them tore a poster off the noticeboard, crumpled it and biffed it at her. They told her to go and drown.

They sat down in a circle and took shots of an energy drink. It was hard to break into the circle, like scraping through a hedge. All that was left was the money for the field trip. The money was inside two coin bags with the openings sealed all the way up, and the permission slip, signed and stamped with Popsicle's family crest and seal.

The money bought three giant cookies, a Coke and five bags of lollies. Zara had one coin left at the end.

They wrote her notes in last period. She tucked the notes into the itchy bra she was supposed to wear. The notes warmed and softened. She made a wish that the notes would say nice stuff. Miss read the winning short story from the competition and Zara felt like a hot air balloon was lifting her up. Miss read the story. Her voice was rough by the time she got to the part where Zero's legs were wrecked and Zero got revenge by tricking all the animals into putting their legs in the crocodile's mouth so their legs got bitten off so everyone was even and Zero outsmarted them all.

Jasmeena Hahdi whispered. Zara thought she heard *derivative* and *pernicious*.

Miss came around and collected all the money bags and permission slips for the field trip. Zara pulled her head inside the collar of her shirt and held out the empty coin bags.

She dawdled home without an appetite, squeezing her last dollar. As she walked, she made one buck worth of wishes.

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If he was going to sell his First Editions, he needed to know how eBay worked, so Zara pulled the towel off his

and ripped off the bits inside the cover saying first edition or no edition. Zero edition was better than first edition, Zero the Hero. She sprinted down to school and threw the ripped paper in the Dumpster Dump, behind the Down Syndrome block.

By the time she got home, the books had all sold and she packed the books into courier bags. Zara got a whole twenty dollars, and for only twelve books! And they were gonna pay for the shipping too! She could pay back the field trip money, plus buy snacks for her BFFs! She put the chest of books on her scooter and wobbled it down to the post shop before it closed. Dawdling back, she thought about how Popsicle was taking ages, but she remembered he'd said as he went down the driveway that he had to drop the wig back to Mum.