

“How on earth did you come up with *that* idea?” someone asked me, after beta reading my book length story.

“What do you mean?”

They can't tell that I'm slightly panicked, because we are conversing in text. But I am. I can feel the heat in my face, the worry gnawing at the pit of my stomach. Did they hate the whole thing?

I struggle with negative feedback, and it's not because I'm too prideful to think that I got it right on the first try. It's a problem that stems deep within and is rooted to other things I'd rather not discuss right now. But as I wait for a reply, I'm wondering if I'll need to brace myself for negative feedback.

“I just mean, it's amazing and you have all these little side acts going on, and every single one mattered in the end because they all wove together. How'd you do that? Oh, and when is the next story coming out?”

I'm taken aback, both by the compliment and the question. The thing is, I don't take compliments any better than criticism. These are personal flaws I'm working on, learning to smile and simply say, “Thank you, I'm so glad you liked it.” or “Thank you, I'm grateful you took the time to read it.”

But the real stumper is to answer the *how*. It's easy to put a smile on your face and thank someone regardless of how you're feeling inside. It's another thing entirely to answer a question that has so many faucets to it you're not sure which one to explain first.

And will anyone really believe that you saw a 5 second clip in a tv show, and your entire story stemmed from that? While I won't disclose the show, I will confess that the entire scene had no bearing on the outcome of the episode. It was a moment where we learned the depth of compassion one character had for others.

I was so touched by this moment of kindness and compassion, my mind started whirling with

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questions. I blinked and an entire story rolled out in front of me. I told it many different ways, late into the night, to myself before I finally tried to stop the chaos and wrote it out.

I laughed at that attempt, and moved on with life. The endless piles of laundry, the never ending need for clean dishes, and the pleas for help from people. But that story, it was always pulling me back, it begged me to make it nice. It knocked on the door when I was supposed to be sleeping, and whispered, “Can I come in?” It stole my attention when I should have been mingling with others. It kept me company on cold morning walks, and in cold, lonely waiting rooms.

Over time, I got tired of fending it off, throwing it back into the waves just to see if it was another rock that would skip. So, I sat down and wrote it, again, and again until it became something worth reading.

*“... what if?”*

All my story ideas are like that, they all come from the normal mundane world around me, with one small twist. Instead of taking the idea at face value, I’m prone to say, “Yeah, but what if...”

It’s not hard to add, “but what if...” to the end of an idea. “A woman is shopping, but what if she runs into someone she never thought she’d see again. What if that person turns out to be someone who knows something that could put them both in danger? And what if, that person is there to take her far away, despite the fact that her family is at home waiting on her return?”

You see the “what if” game can go from subtle and bizarre, to crazy and deep within seconds. My youngest is great at playing this game with me. One day, we were sitting around the fire pit, which might sound quaint, but there wasn’t a fire burning.

It was the middle of the day, and we were sitting outside eating our lunch. The kids crowded around, and our conversation went from whatever we’d been reading and studying earlier in

the day to the “what if” game.

“What if we were roasting marshmallows right now, in the middle of the day?”

“What if there was a fire ban, and the fire brigade turned up and hosed out the fire.”

“What if,” my youngest said, a mischievous twinkle to his eye, “you were roasting marshmallows and your friend asked you for your bank account number.”

“That’s weird,” I said. “Why would he do that? Because we just bought something from him, or did he buy from us? Are we paying him back for the mallows?”

“Because he’s trying to distract you from the fact that he just poisoned your marshmallow, and he wants your details so he can steal all your money once you’re done eating.”

“That’s a little gruesome.”

“You never know what could happen, though.”

“Remind me not to let you buy the marshmallows.”

“It’s just the what-if game.”

And that’s pretty much how it goes. You ask yourself “what if”, “why”, and “but how..” Until things start to fall in place, and the story begins to spread out in front of you. Until that mundane detail you have no idea why you wrote suddenly becomes one of the most crucial parts of the entire story.

I don’t always play the game to come up with story ideas. Sometimes life itself provides enough ideas for a story. I’ve had a couple brewing in the back of my mind for many years, one based on an odd real life story that was in the news in my teens, and another that was inspired by those creepy people who used to sit in Walmart.

You know, the ones who offered to put together child identity packs for your children so that

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if your child was ever separated from you, then you could claim your child as your own. Imagine the look on the face of the person trying to convince me to buy one, when I said, “But why would my child be separated from me?”

“Kidnapping,” was all he said.

I walked away, much to the seller’s annoyance. I didn’t become a customer, but I admit a story began sprawling to life in front of me. It was more a horrible idea of what could happen if some random stranger started snapping photos of your kid claiming they were putting together a security package. My husband said I was reading way too many mysteries at the time. He was probably right. But still, the niggler for a story idea sits there, festering under the surface.

*“... story ideas are like that, they all come from the normal mundane world around me, with one small twist...”*

There are also stories that come to mind that I can’t quite remember how or where I came up with the idea. Maybe it was something I read, or watched, and I anticipated a different ending, a different climatic moment. I couldn’t tell you.

One of the stories I worked on for NaNoWriMo 2022 is like that. I am not 100% certain where the idea stemmed from. I remember reading a line in one of the Shopaholic books and thinking how funny it was, and giving it a million different ways it could play out. Yet, that line, that thought process isn’t even in this story. I imagined it would be, once, but in the end it’s not. Did that line inspire the whole story? I’ve no idea.

I’ve told myself this tale many times, too. Front to back, inside out. And the crazy part is, I still don’t know exactly where it starts. Or maybe I do because I know a small family’s world is shaken when a mysterious letter arrives in the mail. It discloses that one of them is not who they pretend to be.

And while the family is busy trying to come to grips with that information, one of them is still hiding a secret. A much bigger secret, and someone else knows what it is. They've given the secret holder limited time to fess up, or else.

*.. but, how did you weave it all together?"*

So I guess I do know where it starts, and I know where it ends, but there's a portion of the beginning that's still missing. It eludes me, dances just close enough so that I think I know what's happening, and then it vanishes, slipping away into the night like mist. I keep chipping away at it, here and there. Then I lay it aside for a while, let it breath, allow the characters to simmer in their new identities before they spring another crazy secret on me.

I turn to another project that's in the works. This one has a solid opening, and I'm deep in the murky middle. It's been easier to write, because it's a sequel, and the characters already seem to know their place and only throw the occasional curveball at me. Reminding me of all that I put them through in book one, and how they are attempting to navigate their new lives. Sometimes, I think they resent that a little because they send curveballs that I don't see coming.

*"Yeah, but how did you weave it all together?"* That's the harder part of the question to answer, because sometimes I take full credit, and sometimes I have to admit the characters of my stories deserve the credit.

I know, I know.. The characters can only have the life I give them when I write them. Let me tell you a little secret, sometimes those characters take on a life of their own. They dance in your inkwell and stamp out their disapproval all over the fresh pages you spent days writing. They sit on your shoulder, roll their eyes and say, "That's the stupidest thing, and not at all what I would do." And other times, they trip over a flower pot you didn't know existed and it turns out to be the very thing you needed to weave a frayed end together.

I once read that if you play close enough attention you'll stumble upon hundreds of story

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ideas every single day. You just have to be alert, notice things, and ask enough questions to see the story they hold. This statement made me laugh, because I felt like I'd finally met someone who understood the inner workings of my brain. Someone who is probably a master at the What If game, and doesn't take three steps backwards when you mention out of control characters.

They might also have a better answer for how they get their story ideas, but I'm doubtful. Not that I doubt another writer's ability, but because they also said that they once stumbled on a story idea by reading an article and saying, "Yeah, but what if..."



Author's Note:

Dear Reader,

I hope that you don't think I'm too crazy after reading all this. Instead, I hope that should we ever meet and you notice a glazed look, a set jaw, or find me unresponsive that you don't think it's due to disinterest or anger towards you. Rather, know that I am deep within the realms of some story that is playing out in my mind. That it holds me so tightly, I've struggled to break free and focus on whatever conversation we may be having, or pleasantries we were exchanging. Something you said, might have even brought the look about, because it might be the key to the story I'm writing.

You might be able to draw me back, there's always hope. Simply whisper, "What if?" and see what happens. Be forewarned, I might be three laps ahead though, well out of the reach of the "what if" game where I've reached a roadblock deep within my story. If that's the case, I'm just mulling it over, from all angles, wondering which viewpoint is best to write from, and how on earth I'm going to get them out of the current mess they are in.

Just know that I'm a million miles away, in some made up town, not angry or ignoring you. If you're patient enough, I'll resurface. If you're brave enough to ask, I might even tell you what I'm writing about.

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# The Reluctant Author

