

# Rough Life

by Mike Gray



As a story, I count myself pretty lucky. I'm not some forgotten scribble on scrap paper like most of his ideas. In fact, right now I'm on eight-by-eleven HP multipurpose stock, with a Swingline high-capacity staple through my top right corner. My text is dark, haughty, inviting—I especially like the way my capital Ts look in this Garamond font!—and at seventeen pages, I'm one of my author's longest works to date.

I'm due to be workshopped later this week. *I know* I have potential, but my author doesn't have faith in my characters, and that scares me. It's only because he's preoccupied with event. He forgets to fall in love with them, but, oh, they're fantastic: rounded, nuanced, delicately characterized. For instance, Sydney boils his spare change to sterilize the coins, and he's a germaphobe, so that fits, right? And he's in love with Opal, who's an architect from Wisconsin, only she has this really complicated family history, and that adds conflict because it makes her a little difficult to approach at first. And she's described so beautifully.

The workshop members think so, too. Twelve of the fifteen have already looked at me, and, granted, most of their critiques are pretty apathetic. But I think my author will appreciate some of the more insightful ones. Like Emily Frankel—she read me three times and wrote suggestions all over the margins. She even caught the inversion of the color red, the way he uses it as a metaphor that signals when to go instead of stop. Like when Sydney first meets Opal, and she's wearing that red sweater, and, of course, we want him to go for it, we're rooting for him, go get her! Only—well, Emily actually thinks it's a little overdone at times. *That it starts to seem like Opal's entire wardrobe is red*, which sounds a little harsher than it

was intended to, maybe.

(I thought my author could change the hues a bit, like crimson or amaranth: “Opal appears, dressed in jeans and an amaranth sweater,” or something like that. But, you know, it’s ultimately up to him.)

He looks at me with such passion sometimes, like he could warm himself on my figurative language. He’s particularly proud of the feel of Opal’s touch, “like pearls drawn across Sydney’s skin,” so I try to hold those words up a bit higher every time he rereads me.

But, as it turns out, his rereading might very well be the problem.

At first it was so natural and effortless; he could type on me for hours without stopping to read or analyze, but all he seems to do anymore is criticize me. Some days he’ll reread me over twenty times, and all that passion deteriorates into frustration; he stops typing altogether and becomes obsessed with my shape and the size of my paragraphs; before long, he’s swearing at me for no reason.

I contain the word *sorry* six times, and I exhaust myself holding them up as high as I can.

I show promise—I *really* do—but he wants me perfect right now. He doesn’t understand revision, and I’m terrified that I’m going to be tossed aside because of it. Luckily he’s not in the habit of throwing us away, but someday, if the stack gets high enough—who knows?