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Sweet Revenge

by Thomas Hunt

As he sat at the dining room table, Arthur thought about his life. Reading through the lengthy legal document was a quite a boar, but his life, now that was something interesting.

Arthur had been a professional writer. I say been because in 1967 he stopped publishing his work. He still considered himself to be a professional and still sat down at his writing desk and pounded on his typewriter for three to four hours every morning. His more lengthy sessions usually came on mornings when he was feeling low and he used the process of writing to lighten his mood. While he never published anything, he was very strict on what writing was to bear his name and what writing was to be burnt. As a rule he kept good compositions in the right hand drawer of his desk and bad ones in the left. Every month he would burn all of the bad ones and properly bind the good ones. He had a small section in his library that consisted of merely his own unpublished work.

He knew people on the outside would love to read his work, but he was fiercely angry about what the people had

said the last time he let them read his work. There had been book burnings, pta meetings, and harsh criticisms in literary journals. While his work did gain best-seller status and among most critics he was considered a genius, He was still savagely attacked by some critics. And these critics did not attack his work, they attacked him. They said that Arthur was a man with a secret in his past and this secret ate at him from the inside and forced him to write the way that he wrote. They said that Arthur was perhaps a homosexual and wrote about young boys because he secretly fantasized for their company. They said that Arthur was a fraud and stole his themes and ideas from earlier writers. One such critic said that Arthur's work was all derivative of the late great William Shakespeare and proved his points with luscious footnotes. The latter critic had then signed a book deal with a reputable publisher in order to further spread his deranged ideas about Arthur's work. The pta meetings were no less fervent than the critics. Most pta leaders agreed that Arthur's works were great literature but they opposed to the tone. They found his work to be "depressing" and worried that if their children were allowed to read it in school they might become "despondent" and perhaps even "suicidal". Others opposed the titles of Arthur's books. These members of the

pta, being largely illiterate had failed to read even past the first page of the book but still wanted to get in on the fun of hating things in a large group. And get in on the fun they did. After these members finished their tirade about the "intolerable indecency" and "hateful feelings" contained inside of this book (generally the book had not been opened and there was hardly a crease down its spine) proved that this book was nothing more than the work of the "devil" and we must "protect" the children. These tirades were usually followed by the book burnings.

While Arthur did feel a bit sorry to deprive his true fans of his more recent work, this sorrow was easily buried by the rage he still felt at these critics, pta members, and book burners. However, there was one man who Arthur hated more than the three groups combined: his contact at the publishing agency, Mr. Howard. Mr. Howard had seemed like a nice man at first, he published Arthur's first novel and it turned out very much to Arthur's liking. Arthur then agreed that a few of his short stories, originally published in other publications should be combined into a series of books. Mr. Howard again came through and did a great job. But after Arthur decided that he no longer wanted to publish any more of his work that Mr. Howard started to slip on Arthur's scale of quality human beings.

Before we go into what he did, I think we'll first need a little background on Mr. Howard. Mr. Howard was a huge fan of Arthur's work. He was fortunate enough to read Arthur's first published short story and became an instant fan. In those early years he was always on the look out for another one of Arthur's stories and each time he found one, he was never disappointed. When Mr. Howard got his job at the publishing company his dream was to meet Arthur. All he wanted to do was meet him, shake his hand, thank him graciously for his work and let him know the impact that his work had upon his life (it was the reason he went into publishing). After working at the company a few months, Mr. Howard had still not accomplished his dream of meeting his idol. But then the assignment came to him. He was to be Arthur's contact at the publishing company, he would not only get to meet Arthur and perhaps get to know him on a more personal level, but he would get to take a small part in allowing more people to read Arthur's work. Mr. Howard was overjoyed. He accepted the assignment immediately and when Arthur sent in new work to be published, Mr. Howard fought to have it published exactly as Arthur specified. If Arthur didn't want any quotes or a description of the book on the dust jacket than that's the way it would be. If Arthur didn't want a photo of the artist on the back

flap, then so be it. Mr. Howard's vehemence forced the publishing company to take Arthur's demands as though they were the words of God himself. Arthur was very pleased with the job Mr. Howard was doing. None of his books were made into radio plays, none of his characters were ever licensed to appear in commercials and when he received his advance copy of the book the cover and the printing always looked the way Arthur had envisioned it, and sometimes even better.

But after Arthur told Mr. Howard of his decision to stop publishing his work, Mr. Howard became very angry. Anger was not a normal emotion for Mr. Howard. Usually he was a smooth tempered, middle of the road kind of guy. But the thought of Arthur depriving the world of his genius was practically more than Mr. Howard could bear. He didn't even think he'd be able to continue at the publishing company. "What was the point", he thought, "of publishing some nincompoop's work while Arthur's prose sat somewhere on a dusty shelf?" Then a thought came to Mr. Howard's head, a thought that hurt him at first, but he had to ask, he would be kicking himself for the rest of his life if he didn't ask. "Arthur", he said, "Would you allow me to stay on as your assistant and read and catalogue your work?" Arthur thought about the question for a while, he could use

an assistant, but he knew of the joy that Mr. Howard took in publishing and didn't want that kind of energy around anymore. "No, I'm sorry Mr. Howard" Arthur said, "no offence meant, but I don't really plan to show my new work to anyone. I'm quite tired of knowing what other people think about my work, and I really don't think their opinion matters anymore." Mr. Howard was crushed. In one minute, his job, his life had become meaningless.

Once he arrived home, Mr. Howard became angry at Arthur's refusal to stand tall and fulfill the demands of his loving public. He became angry at Arthur's refusal to even let him, his long time publisher, read and enjoy his work. Mr. Howard knew what he had to do right then, he had to convince Arthur that he was right and that Arthur's work was so great that must be shown to the public, it would be a crime to keep it locked in a drawer somewhere. Mr. Howard began mobilizing his forces. He leaked the story to a friend of his at the Daily News and the story went out on the front page the next day. He then started going on radio talk shows and trying to get the people to rise up and let Arthur know how much their work meant to them. He then started a club, it was called "Readers UNITE" and as a prerequisite for joining you had to write a personal letter to Arthur begging him to reconsider. Also there was a

little known prerequisite that to become an officer in the club you had to journey to Arthur's house and try to ask him in person to change his mind. Mr. Howard's attempts at popularity and organization had been very successful, but his attempts to change Arthur's mind were largely unsuccessful.

After Mr. Howard left, Arthur knew how angry he was and thought about his decision over dinner. He knew that there were people in the world that needed his work, and he again felt some pains of sorrow that he had to deprive these people. He then called for his lawyer to bring over his will, as he planned to alter it. His lawyer came over the next evening and Arthur altered his will to say that after his death, Mr. Howard should be allowed to publish whatever he like, as long as he felt the quality of the work was up to Arthur's high standards. Arthur also put in his will that Mr. Howard should be allowed to edit his work (for clarity, not content) even posthumously. Arthur felt that this last proposition was very generous, and should please Mr. Howard very much even though Arthur knew that it would be quite a while before Mr. Howard would learn of this provision. Arthur signed the new version of his will and his lawyer went quickly to file it away in his safe, the will of a famous author being a valuable commodity that

one did not want to misplace and throw out in a pile of newspapers. Now, with his new will in place, Arthur went to bed pleased. He knew, instinctively, that tomorrow was going to be a good day for writing and he was looking forward to it. To write whatever he pleased without having to worry about an audience would be a pleasure he had not enjoyed since he was a small boy writing short stories in his notebook after school.

Arthur woke up the next morning feeling refreshed and went right to his desk. He began to write like a machine. Story idea after story idea went flying into his typewriter. Outlines were as easy to write as shopping lists. Arthur had a very productive morning of writing.

As was his routine, Arthur went downstairs to have a light breakfast and catch up on the day's events. As he was biting into his English muffin, Arthur noticed the headline on the front page of the Daily News screamed "Famous Author Arthur Calls it Quits!" Arthur was mortified. Mr. Howard had told the press. Arthur then went over and turned the radio on. The talk stations were all abuzz with people who wanted to chat about why Arthur had quit publishing. They called him a coward for not being able to handle the pressure. They said that they were glad he wasn't writing anymore because they didn't

need any more "smut". Arthur then learned about Mr. Howard's group "Readers UNITE" and that they would be sending letter after letter, petition after petition to Arthur and their Midwest President, a one Mr. James Hallbrook claimed that he would personally visit Arthur twice a week to try to make him reconsider. The radio treated these people as if they were lunatics and for once, Arthur found himself agreeing with popular opinion.

The next day the letters started to pour in. The day after that the people started to knock on the door. The day after that they started to bang on the door. Arthur lived in a house under siege. Sometimes the noise was so loud he even found himself unable to write. He was forced to build a large wall around his property. His field which had once stretched off into the distance in the backyard was now a small lawn trapped in by walls that would normally only be found in a medieval fortress. Here in his walled castle Arthur wrote and wrote and wrote. After a few weeks the noise died down outside but the letters, the letters never stopped. It seemed that "Readers UNITE" had even gone international and Arthur began receiving dozens of letters each day in languages he couldn't read. Some in languages he couldn't even identify.

As the years past by Arthur's anger drifted away from the pta members, the literary critics and the book burners. Arthur's anger became focused on Mr. Howard. He never showed this, as he never wrote to Mr. Howard and outside guests were never allowed at Arthur's home anymore, but this did not stop the anger from growing. Finally Arthur had an idea. He called his lawyer over to his house and began to work on a new will. Arthur sat back at the table and smiled as his idea came to his mind. It was the kind of idea that would only delight an old man. When Arthur had begun writing he had been a young boy, when he stopped publishing he had been of middle age, but now Arthur was an old man and thought as old men do. He thought of no one but himself and he cared little for his legacy or what mark he had made on this world. It was these thoughts that dominated his brain when he forced his lawyer to draw up his new will. The lawyer, being a slimy sort as most lawyers are, felt that what Arthur was doing was cruel, but it bothered him little, like most lawyers, the man's only interest was in the bottom line and Arthur paid very well. The lawyer finished writing the document and slid it across the table to Arthur. Arthur sat back and thought about his life. He then reached for a pen and signed the will.

Mr. Howard had not spoken to Arthur since their meeting all those years ago. He often wrote to Arthur and occasionally stopped by his house and tried to visit. His letters came back unread and his visits never got past the outside walls. Still, Mr. Howard did not believe what he was doing was wrong in anyway. He felt that Arthur was being very selfish and cared nothing for his readers. Mr. Howard also felt that Arthur cared nothing for him and that all their years working together as publisher and author had been a cruel joke of some kind. Mr. Howard felt this way until the sad day, when Arthur died. Mr. Howard had heard about it on the radio and had rushed a letter out to "Readers UNITE" informing them of the great loss and asking them to please wear black armbands for a month rather than the typical week (he also told them to stop sending letters and wait to see what the publisher would do, but to mention it in this context seems a little morbid, as it seemed a little morbid then to Mr. Howard, but business, as they say, is business). The reason Mr. Howard had his change of heart was because of a letter delivered by courier from Arthur's lawyers. Mr. Howard had never received any form of communication from Arthur and even this small note from a third party allowed Mr. Howard to instantly forgive Arthur and restored him instantly in Mr. Howard's heart.

The note said that Mr. Howard was to rush to Arthur's house and further instructions would be given after his arrival. Mr. Howard was beyond ecstatic. What he had hoped for had finally come true. The note could only be interpreted one way. He would be able to edit and publish Arthur's work posthumously. Mr. Howard felt a strange mix of joy and sorrow as he ran to his car and rushed over to Arthur's house. He was greatly sorry to see Arthur go, but he was very excited to have a chance to read and allow others to read Arthur's reclusive work. His heart thumped as he drove to Arthur's house.

When Mr. Howard arrived at Arthur's house he rushed to the front gate and rang the bell. As he waited for an answer he noticed that there seemed to be smoke billowing out of Arthur's chimney. He found this to be rather odd as it was the middle of summer. A man came to the door and escorted Mr. Howard to Arthur's library, the room where he stored all of his unpublished work. Waiting for Mr. Howard was Arthur's lawyer and what looked like a few members of his staff. The lawyer asked Mr. Howard to sit down. Mr. Howard sat down at the desk, knowing that this was the desk where Arthur had penned all of his later work. It was a great honor for him even to sit in this seat, although he knew he could never fill it. Mr. Howard looked up from the

great desk to the lawyer and he noticed a glint of sadness in the lawyer's eyes. He assumed that this was just from the loss of his client, and he continued surveying the room, hoping to spot Arthur's cache of unpublished work. He saw a bookshelf full of books, a small table near the window and the roaring fire that was no doubt putting out the smoke he had seen earlier. In the corner he saw a small shelf full of what looked like manuscript after manuscript. So it was true, Arthur had kept writing after he stopped publishing. Mr. Howard had always believed in him, but some in the organization felt that it was stupid to keep hassling Arthur, because they felt that writing was something people only did for publication, that it could not bring any joy to the writer. Mr. Howard had hoped they were wrong and now he knew they were.

The lawyer interrupted Mr. Howard's thoughts as he spoke: "My instructions are quite clear and if I deviate from them at all, I will stand to lose not only my license, but all of my clients. I hope you will understand my position, Mr. Howard?"

"Of course, I understand completely. Arthur's wishes must be upheld."

"I'm glad you understand. Now as per Arthur's wishes you will be allowed to read all of his unpublished work..."

Mr. Howard's heart began beating faster and his mouth began to drop open. The lawyer was acting as though he was a character in one of Mr. Howard's nightly dreams. This was always as he had pictured it, this was always as he had wanted it to happen and now it was happening. "...one page at a time." Mr. Howard's heart stopped. What could that mean, what a strange provision. There was no real advantage to editing one page at a time. One must look at the whole work to properly guide the story to its completion. "... after you have read said page, the page will be tossed into the fire and you will be allowed to read the next page. This process will continue until you have read all of Arthur's unpublished work. If you wish to decline, all of his unpublished work will be burnt, immediately. If you wish to accept this contract, please sign here at the dotted line."

Mr. Howard looked at the lawyer. Mr. Howard looked at the shelf of paper. Mr. Howard looked at the fire. The fire seemed to be laughing at him. It was as though he could see Arthur in the next world having a hell of a good laugh at his expense. Mr. Howard began to cry. He sobbed uncontrollably as he thought about all the people who would never be able to read Arthur's work because of what he did. He thought about how he had failed and all of his

popularity and organization had added up to nothing. The lawyer looked down on him, waiting for an answer. Mr. Howard continued to cry, unable to stop the flood of tears and more unable to stop the flood of self-hatred smashing through his brain. After about ten minutes he finally was able to stop it. The room sat in silence, the fire crackling softly. Mr. Howard sat up at the desk and looked again at the lawyer who had maintained his composure despite Mr. Howard's breakdown. Mr. Howard looked out the window at the stone walls.

Mr. Howard signed on the dotted line.