## Passion Play

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This was my first published story, as it states below. A while back, Jonathan Ostrowsky-Lantz, the editor of Unearth: The Magazine of Science Fiction Discoveries— a noble publication dedicated to the encouragement of new science fiction writers—began a policy of reprinting first stories by professionals in the area, along with introductory essays by the authors telling how the stories came to be written and including some advice to beginning writers.

For whatever such a preface may be worth in this place, I’ll cause it to occur between here and the story itself—

INTRODUCTION

I had wanted to write for many years, but did not have an opportunity until I had completed my master’s thesis and taken a job with the government. I was assigned to an office in Dayton, Ohio for training, and I reported there on February 26, 1962. As I had decided to try writing science fiction, I spent a week reading all the current science fiction magazines and some random paperbacks. I then sat down and began writing, every evening, turning out several stories a week and sending them off to the magazines. I drew a number of rejection slips, and then in March I received a note from Cele Goldsmith at Ziff-Davis, saying that she was buying this story, “Passion Play.” It appeared in the August, 1962 issue of Amazing Stories.

Whether it actually was or was not, it seemed to me an almost classic case of applied insight, because I had done something right before I wrote it which I had not done before. I had gathered together all of my rejected stories and spent an evening reading through them to see whether I could determine what I was doing wrong. One thing struck me about all of them: I was overexplaining. I was describing settings, events and character motiva-tions in too much detail. I decided, in viewing these stories now that they had grown cold, that I would find it insulting to have anyone explain anything to me at that length. I resolved thereafter to treat the reader as I would be treated myself, to avoid the unnecessarily explicit, to use more indirection with respect to character and motivation, to draw myself up short whenever I felt the tendency to go on talking once a thing had been shown.

Fine. That was my resolution. I still had to find a story idea to do it with, as I was between stories just then. Now, I do not know how other people do it, but there is a certain receptive state of mind that I switch on when I am looking for a short story notion. This faculty is dulled when I am working on a novel, as I Usually am these days, so that if I want it now it generally takes me a full day to set up the proper mental climate. It comes faster if I am between books. Whatever, in those days I kept it turned on almost all the time.

The government wanted everyone in my class to have a physical examination. They gave me the forms and I drove up to Euclid over a weekend to see the closest thing we had to a family doctor, to have him complete them. When I sat down in his waiting room, I picked up a copy of Life and began looking through it. Partway along, I came upon a photospread dealing with the death of the racing driver Wolfgang von Tripps. Something clicked as soon as I saw it, and just then the doctor called me in for the checkup. While I was breathing for him and coughing and faking knee jerks and so forth, I saw the entire incident that was to be this short short. I could have written it right then. My typewriter was in Dayton, though, and I’d the long drive ahead of me. The story just boiled somewhere at the back of my mind on the way down, and when I reached my apartment I headed straight for the typewriter and wrote it through. I even walked three blocks to a mailbox in the middle of the night, to get it sent right away.

Cele’s letter of acceptance was dated March 28, almost a month after I’d begun writing. Strangely, the day that it arrived I had gotten the idea for what was to be my next sale (“Horseman!», Fantastic Stories, August, 1962). I returned the contracts on “Passion Play” and followed them with “Horseman!” 1 sold fifteen other stories that year. I was on my way.I cannot really say whether I owe it to that resolution I made on reviewing my rejects, but it felt as if I did and I have always tried to keep the promise I made that day about not insulting the reader’s intelligence.

Another factor did come into operation after I sold this story. It is a subtle phenomenon which can only be experienced. I suddenly felt like a writer. “Confidence” is a cheap word for it, but I can’t think of a better one. That seems the next phase in toughening one’s writing— a kind of cockiness, an “I’ve done it before” attitude. This feeling seems to feed something back into the act of composition itself, providing more than simple assurance. Actual changes in approach, structure, style, tone, began to occur for me almost of their own accord. Noting this, I began to do it intentionally. I made a list of all the things I wanted to know how to handle and began writing them into my stories. This is because I felt that when you reach a certain point as a writer, there are two ways you can go. Having achieved an acceptable level of competence you can keep producing at that level for the rest of your life, quite possibly doing some very good work. Or you can keep trying to identify your weaknesses, and then do something about them. Either way, you should grow as a writer—but Ihe second way is a bit more difficult, because it is always easier to write around a weakness than to work with it, work from it, work through it. It takes longer, if nothing else. And you may fall on your face. But you might learn something you would not have known otherwise and be better as a result.

These are the things I learned, or fancy I learned, from “Passion Play” and its aftereffects. I do have one other thing to say, though, which came to me slowly, much later, though its roots are tangled somewhere here: Occasionally, there arises a writing situation where you see an alternative to what you are doing, a mad, wild gamble of a way for handling something, which may leave you looking stupid, ridiculous or brilliant—you just don’t know which. You can play it safe there, too, and proceed along .the route you’d mapped out for yourself. Or you can trust your personal demon who delivered that crazy idea in the first place.

Trust your demon.At the end of the season of sorrows comes the time of rejoicing. Spring, like a well-oiled clock, noiselessly indicates this time. The average days of dimness and moisture decrease steadily in number, and those of brilliance and cool air begin to enter the calendar again. And it is good that the wet times are behind us, for they rust and corrode our machinery; they require the most intense standards of hygiene.

With all the bright baggage of spring, the days of the Festival arrive. After the season of Lamentations come the sacred stations of the Passion, then the bright Festival of Resurrection, with its tinkle and clatter, its exhaust fumes, sorched rubber, clouds of dust, and its great promise of happiness.

We come here each year, to the place, to replicate a classic. We see with our own lenses the functioning promise of our creation. The time is today, and I have been chosen.

Here on the sacred grounds of Le Mans I will perform every action of the classic which has been selected. Before the finale I will have duplicated every movement and every position which we know occurred. How fortunate! How high the honor!

Last year many were chosen, .but it was not the same. Their level of participation was lower. Still, I had wanted so badly to be chosen! I had wished so strongly that I, too, might stand beside the track and await the flaming Mercedes.

But I was saved for this greater thing, and all lenses are upon me as we await the start. This year there is only one Car to watch—number 4, the Ferrari-analog.

The sign has been given, and the rubber screams; the smoke balloons like a giant cluster of white grapes, and we are moving. Another car gives way, so that I can drop into the proper position. There are many cars, but only one Car.

We scream about the turn, in this great Italian classic of two centuries ago. We run them all here, at the place, regardless of where they were held originally.

“Oh gone masters of creation,” I pray, “let me do it properly. Let my timing be accurate. Let no random variable arise to destroy a perfect replication.”

The dull gray metal of my arms, my delicate gyro-scopes, my special gripping-hands, all hold the wheel in precisely the proper position as we roar into the straightaway.

How wise the ancient masters were! When they knew they must destroy themselves in a combat too mystical and holy for us to understand, they left us these ceremonies, in commemoration of the Great Machine. All the data was there: the books, the films, all; for us to find, study, learn, to know the scared Action.

As we round another turn, I think of our growing cities, our vast assembly lines, our iube-bars, and our beloved executive computer. How great all things are! What a well-ordered day! How fine to have been chosen!

The tires, little brothers, cry out, and the pinging of small stones comes from beneath. Three-tenths of a second, and I shall depress the accelerator an eighth of an inch further.

R-7091 waves to me as I enter the second lap, but I cannot wave back. My finest functioning is called for at this time. All the special instrumentation which has been added to me will be required in a matter of seconds.

The other cars give way at precisely the right instant. I turn, I slide. I crash through the guard rail.

'Turn over now, please!” I pray, twisting the wheel, “and bum.”

Suddenly we are rolling, skidding, upside-down. Smoke fills the Car.

To the crashing noise that roars within my receptors, the crackle and lick of flames is now added.

My steel skeleton—collapsed beneath the impactstresses. My lubricants—burning. My lenses, all but for a tiny area—shattered.

My hearing-mechanism still functions weakly.

Now there is a great hom sounding, and metal bodies rush across the fields.

Now. Now is the time for me to turn off all my functions and cease.

But I will wait. Just a moment longer. I must hear them say it Metal arms drag me from the pyre. I am laid aside. Fire extinguishers play white rivers upon the Car.

Dimly, in the distance, through my smashed receptors, I hear the speaker rumble:"Von Tripps has smashed! The Car is dead!\*\*

A great sound of lamenting rises from the rows of unmoving spectators. The giant fireproof van arrives on the field, just as the attendants gain control of the flames.

Four tenders leap out and raise the Car from the ground. A fifth collects every smouldering fragment.

And I see it all!

“Oh, let this not be blasphemy, pleasel” I pray. “One instant more'”

Tenderly, the Car is set within the van. The great doors close.

The van moves, slowly, bearing off the dead warrior, out through the gates, up the great avenue and past the eager crowds.

To the great smelter. The Melting Pot!

To the place where it will be melted down, then sent out, a piece used to grace the making of each new person.

A cry of unanimous rejoicing arises on the avenue.

It is enough, that I have seen all thisi Happily, I turn myself off.