

GRAY AREA

Maria Amparo N. Warren

The young mother, a part-time writer, takes on a new freelance gig from the small agency that's located in the university's teachers' village. This is the first time she encounters your name. It doesn't have any of the rock star glamor of an elected politician's, that same ubiquity on cement-brick walls with the bleeding spray-painted text "illegal to urinate here." Regardless, it is a name with some bearing. Thirty or so years ago, when you were enrolled in the same university, it was on powder-photocopied flyers plastered all over the schools' hallways. You didn't win a seat in the student council the last year you ran, and you dropped out soon after, but your relatives passed on your name for a position in an executive agency. Then, you slowly rose up the ranks. Your name appeared in bold letters on approval forms and disbursement vouchers. Then memoranda. Then on its own handsome gold-embossed name plate at the corner of your desk, in a room with large windows, located in the Central Office.

The work she's tasked to do involves adding some strategic virtual layers over your name. The young mother—who at this point has only been used to writing travel, real estate, and self-help articles farmed piecemeal by the feature editors of struggling lifestyle magazines—isn't familiar with this kind of content strategy. That's why she asks the content manager, a timid man in a sweat-stained pinstriped polo, if she heard it right the first time. Her question rings loud, but it also goes mostly unnoticed in a warm room full of college-aged interns whose eyes are fixed on their dilapidated screens.

“So all I need to do is put out two thousand words a day—nothing substantial, you said?—on any subject, any genre, just so long as it includes his name?”

“Well, the best approach is to kind of mix it up,” the manager replies sheepishly, “a combo of articles that are really about him and his accomplishments over the years. And then the other... other... I mean, didn’t you see the samples that we sent you?”

“Yes, Sir, I read the samples.”

“Then that shouldn’t be a problem for you. Why would it be? You sent, uh—one of the most *impressive* CVs compared to the ones we usually get. You’re a *gifted* writer,” the content manager enunciates the word exactly the way he means to—as if it’s an apology—“a really gifted one. And so well-schooled in the English language. You shouldn’t have a problem getting *creative* with the material. Or is it the money you’re worried about?”

“The money...” She realizes she is still too proud to say it, to even complete her sentence. But as they both know—well, why else would she have made the journey?

“We can pay some of it upfront. The client has us covered. What are your regular rates like?” There’s an ATM in the commercial building right beside the compound, and the content manager makes sure that the young mother goes home with an envelope full of crisp blue and yellow bills.

At midnight, when she is alone and her son is fast asleep, the young mother flicks open her old laptop and once more, peruses the samples. The work of emulating them, the content manager says, can start right away.

In the first two weeks, you are hailed as your high school’s valedictorian (which you were, in all fairness, in actuality). She spells out all the acronyms, then dedicates whole paragraphs, to the national history of

the academic competitions you had won. Then, you're the owner of a grill restaurant with too many pork dishes branded with your nickname—again, each with their own paragraph-long description. Next, you're the hero of an excerpted fantasy story for an empty blog pretending it has serial readers. The young mother takes an absurd kind of pleasure with the next one—using the acronym of the required keywords beside your name as if you belonged to a religious order—in a lurid “tell-all” exposé. But then, back she goes to the materials she can recycle with a better conscience: your old speeches, old interviews, and the long-prose versions of every single bullet point in your résumé.

The content manager has done well to explain the situation in a way that works for everyone—that means, in a way that doesn't exactly implicate anyone. It's just about where in the World Wide Web people can find your name. Your name should seem most at home when limned with information about the good you've done for the country in the years you were in office. It's fine to devote prime online real estate to your past achievements, as the best of these said achievements are timeless anyway.

Those who need to find your name on a search engine will see it accurately represented when they type it beside your position, or the name of your agency. Key phrases that put your name in more unfavorable positions, or that insinuate things that aren't a hundred percent true—next to the words “corruption” or “scandal”—will be eradicated to corollary sites of similar irrelevance and un-truth. Well, this is the perspective you'd want to give the young mother if you were in her place, if you had the opportunity to speak with her directly, and if you were in the country. You have entrusted the content manager with hiring someone of this caliber, possessing this kind of verbal dexterity and generosity of imagination.

For once, the pay is as consistent as the young mother's work. And the young mother's work is as consistent as it can be now that her tyke is

teething, eating more solid food, and shitting more solid poop. Now that he is learning how to climb the stairs and how to bumble over each step with a touch more recklessness, but not exactly how to fall in any direction other than backwards.

For a time, she's satisfied with the amount of money being wired to her bank account, as that is all she really needs. But beyond fulfilling those imminent needs, it's hard for her to feel rewarded. As the days bleed into one another, even the material she has been successful at recycling seems lean and hard to work with. There's only so much of what has been given that she can milk two thousand words out of. And sooner than she had hoped, she's at her wits' end and close to confronting what she had buried amidst all of this: the implication of writing for you. Eventually, it becomes more difficult to drown out this question with the prospect of being on time with electric bill payments, buying groceries earlier in the week, and shopping for clothes for her son who is rapidly growing out of his old ones. Wouldn't this be the perfect time to motivate her? Wouldn't you have some things to say if you were ever blessed with the opportunity, if you could address someone who was working so hard for you?

You've got some classic openers, that's for sure. The kind you reckon would still pack the same punch as when you first used them for a Miting de Avance. Yes, wouldn't they, if you adapted them just a little? And, say, you could conjure a world for yourself and the young mother to inhabit at the moment, a place where you both feel familiar and safe. How about that famous and widely-blogged-about, but still down-to-earth university café? Either of you would benefit from a rice meal topped with a runny egg and a very sour chutney, plus some hot coffee to keep the conversation flowing. The first step would be to meet her on common ground, yes, and to begin extrapolating together from that same wavelength, albeit for different dreams.

What kind of world would she want for her son as soon as he reached schooling age? Did she want to wean him on the open-air classrooms, grassy fields, and secular freedoms that she once enjoyed—rather, that the two of you enjoyed in different eras? You'd do a great job of encouraging her to strive for the best for him, to work on his application for the integrated school as early as prep. Then, you'd say, how you wish you could have given the same grounded upbringing to your own children, had it not been the safer and more pragmatic choice to send them to private school. In your heart of hearts, you would tell her, you fear that they'll become too soft, too sheltered, and too divorced from the lived reality of the common folk, and that other kids would make fun of them for their privilege, despite their good intentions.

Another good opener you'd foist on her pertains to what her idea of meaningful work might be. After a long and meditative sip of coffee, you'd tell her you were once in her shoes, in that strange middling area between your daydreams for a better world and your consciousness of the few things you could actually do: move papers fast, move people even faster. Your awareness of that gray area manifested more often, the older you became—and the more often you had to choose something important in a high-pressure situation. How you would face another year of raising a dependent. How you'd foot your mortgage payments, for once without the help of your parents. How you'd save face not only for yourself, but for an entire department whose operations would collapse if you didn't intervene. It's these situations, you'd tell her, that truly shape you as a person and determine the direction you take. For sure, she would realize that for herself as time went by.

Like burnt brew in a coffee pot, the taste of reality is a bitter one. But if either of you could do something about it—well, to press on with the metaphor, because after all, the young mother is a writer—don't you have the cream and sugar at your disposal? In order to navigate the murky treachery of life's gray areas, one must get off their moral high horse and learn to dirty

one's feet. Of course, it's not something you would force on her, you'd say, again if you had the opportunity. But if this were a path that she continues to tread—you can't say you wouldn't understand her.

The last thing you'd tell her is that we all become who we're meant to be. Before she knows it, the young mother will have known the weight of being a mother her own mother's age. Hopefully, by then, she wouldn't have abandoned this lofty pursuit of writing. And her son will have grown up to be a respectable young man, the kind you'd want your own children to play with. You, the man who wears a seal on his ring, who enjoys a decent cigar every now and then; the man who signs contracts with the kind of pen you don't throw in the trash can. You've made a decent life for yourself, and your children, and your constituents. In the long run, would it be right to throw all that good work away for a few unevenly publicized mistakes?

Tired of migraines, a bad back, continuous dry spells, and even the odd stream-of-consciousness hallucination, when she gets too busy she forgets to eat, the young mother eventually considers wrapping the gig up. Her desire to do her best in any given situation, her expansive imagination, and her resourcefulness—she eventually learns that those have their limits. And so does the threshold of Google in the years that it implements its Hummingbird update. The search engine becomes more intelligent about boosting relevant content, leaving the spammy and keyword-dense stuff to the backwater. Among the more discerning people in the industry, any SEO practice that differs from white hat soon earnestly falls out of fashion. The black hat tactics become the realm of scrupulous outfits looking only to fleece the tech-illiterate, those who are vulnerable to the promise of overnight search engine success. And the gray hat tactics, well...

In a future you're not at all privy to, the young mother decides to keep only tentative contact with the content manager. Eventually, she cuts

off all contact entirely. She ignores his texts and calls, and it takes him only a couple of weeks to get the message. By the time her son has learned to speak in full sentences, she has recovered a few more pieces of her erstwhile dignity. Slowly, she regains what she lost when she was desperate—when the young father had walked out the door— a willingness to gamble on something different for herself. She gets interviewed for positions in adjunct industries and slowly works her way up to a full-time job with benefits. Then she worries a little less about the financial resources needed to raise her son. For a long, long while after, it's elsewhere that she dedicates her remaining creative skills.

In the interviews after the one with the content manager, she hides evidence of this gig. The same goes for the occasional meetup with extended family, or the once-in-a-while date. When asked what she did in the most difficult months right after her son's father left her, she smiles, says she found some more freelance writing work, and promptly changes the topic. Not listed among her career highlights are the months that she told the online world of your exploits: student council leader, civil servant, superhero, restaurateur (who specialized in pork products), aspiring writer, or priest in the order of CESO. None of this appears in any of the subsequent evolutions of her curriculum vitae.

It's as secret as the ledgers, the undocumented assets and liabilities, the encrypted calls and messages, the position in a multinational that was offered by a contact under the table, and the plane tickets 8,000 miles away. The last thing you two share is that urgent inclination to bury the past under a thick, thick layer, and to start anew somewhere else.