

Short-Form Writing Sample - Jordan Cutler

**An excerpt from my upcoming short story horror compilation book titled:
*"A Collection of Strange Occurrences"***

"We're all turning into fish"

30 years ago, I never thought I'd be in the bog I currently swim in day-by-day. Life is so much easier as a child, you aren't yet exposed to the horrors of the outer world, only the residential ones. I'm not even really sure anymore which of the two is more effective, their distinctness. You just consume whatever's around you, it gives you some sense of relief for a time, until you get used to the taste of it. Then it becomes entertainment.

That's what I've gathered in the industry at least, people love a good story, that's what brought me in to begin with. If only I didn't pick up that damned paper. I was quite clever long ago, found a way to lodge a sharp rock into the dispenser, crack it open real quick once you fiddle around a bit. They didn't cost as much back then, no one really cared if you got spotted, you just gotta make sure to toss it before you get too close to home or school. That all completely went out the window when some smartass decided to whip up a devil box, spreads shit faster than I can make it.

I can't complain much though, business is always booming, at least greater than I've ever seen it. There's never a shortage of tragedy to cover, the same goes for happier stories. Those don't sell as well though, thus I tend to lean on the former. Working on a salary helps ease the tension, allows some sense of stability amidst a constant hunger, the times are forever changing rapidly and it gets a bit hard to keep up all on your own. The big corporations, collections of the ill, are popping up quicker and quicker, the benefits are too hard to pass up on, especially when you get your own slave to help balance it all.

She's a nice girl, likes to act as if she enjoys her job but I can see the bags under her shiny eyes. It makes me wonder if these kids are cut out for such an intense line of work. Folding papers and emptying ashtrays for bigoted money launderers isn't quite what you expect when you finally land a job, for most it's a dream for some reason. We have a lot in common in that way I suppose, never really thought of it like that. I wonder how and where they'll end up, how it'll affect them in the long run.

The door to my office suddenly swings open, it's created gust disturbing the palpable smog throughout. Behind it, said 22 year old lady stands with a handful of folders. Her wavy, dark hair is around shoulder length, a tighter, red corseted top and white, frilly trousers sway to and fro with every step. Or maybe it's a skirt, who am I to tell? Clacking against the hard floors, those foot reshapers have to leave her with bruises at the end of the day, I truly pity her ostentatiousness.

"Got a real intriguing one somewhere in here, suppose it's about time for a step up then", she says, sliding the stack onto a desk.

Leaning behind it, elbows attached to the cluttered piece, is a man in a blue button up shirt, tie tossed over the back of his chair. Around his neck, instead, is a silver chain, scruffy beard puffing a stubby cigarette above it. A heap of stringy hair, curled and drooping in the front, sits atop his head, also a fittingly peppery color. Tucked loosely into a pair of golden pants, one side sticking out slightly, he stands before flicking cancer to the side.

"Thanks Lil", he says before grasping one of the folders, flipping through it briefly before sighing.

"He wants to see you before you head out, said within the hour", she warns.

He chuckles, stepping around his desk while stuffing the papers into a satchel. Tossing it over, as well as a striped, white jacket and hat hanging next to the exit, he does such.

Before him is a narrow hall, bustling with desperate people pacing back and forth, a line of other offices on the right all shut, dark. Scribbling and chattering around bullpens, fashionable figures discuss topics of all ilk, quickly shifting between political climate, murder sprees, and missing pets. Lilian follows behind the man as he passes all, eventually reaching a gilded door amongst the crowd, nameplate on its front. Not stopping, he side-eyes the obscured window before opening its neighboring stairwell, making his way down slowly.

She stammers and turns to the side.

“What’re you waiting for?”, the journalist says, stopping and looking at her.

Excitingly descending, the two quickly leave the multi-storied building, hailing a cab to the station as he lights a fresh cig.

Mostly quiet on their ride, Lilian fumbles through her own satchel, double-checking all proper documents for travel as they arrive. Handing the journalist his ticket, he flicks eyes across it, raising a brief brow before shoving it into his jacket pocket. Patting the driver on their shoulder, he slips a large bill into their open fist before exiting.

Without any luggage to weigh them down, the duo approach the station, one more quickly than the other, as a train docks itself. Right on time as always. A plethora of passengers wait outside of it, lined up at every feasible entrance with everything imaginable. Varied in all race and gender, the nearby board detailing all current routes is just the same, theirs at the absolute bottom.

A primary layer of men await anyone that enters the station, approaching all with a hand raised. Noticing the odd duo, one of them quickly steps up before extending out a palm.

“Identification and reason for travel please”, he says.

Fumbling through his coat, the journalist flips open a badge before presenting his boarding pass. By the time he’s able to do this, Lilian is already retrieving hers from the man.

“What’s the scoop, er... Stanley?”, the examiner asks while looking him up and down.

“Can’t disclose that information, sure you’ll find out soon enough”, Stan says behind a fake smile.

Huffing, the man hands him back everything before motioning to an empty, open door. Waving a hand in response, the journalist enters said car, Lilian following closely behind.

Ahead of the two is a barren section of train, both connected sections filled to the brim with people, some of which are standing, prepared to hold on for dear life. Stepping up to a random pair of seats, Stan sits against the window-side one, its cushion worn to the nth degree. Wiping the other off before sitting next to him, Lilian’s hand runs clean across the smooth surface, its outer finish almost undisturbed. Gazing out the windows, looking ahead and behind, as well as the floor, the duo wait for what feels like ages.

Entering one at a time, a slow and meticulous process, each passenger seems to struggle with the storage of their belongings. Attempting to find a most suitable seat, either as far away from others as possible or as close, they shuffle onto the steaming train. Checking their pocket watches, all those operating the metallic beast, along with some assisting in boarding, count each second until the non-negotiable departure overtime. Reaching such, dozens of people are outright turned away, throwing arms up in anger, some falling in sadness as all doors shut before them.

Suddenly roaring to life, the train progressively wheels ahead, its creaking joints barely holding up under the intense weight of countless passengers. Each passing face not currently aboard glares in animalistic hatred, an overwhelming jealousy piercing through the smoky

windows. Latching onto a moving door, one of them attempts to enter our duo's empty car, only to slide and tumble to the ground in a loud slam, no one near checking on their condition soon after. They simply stand and chat amongst one another while staring.

Fully exiting the station, city surrounding the screaming engine slowly fading away, people begin to move about the cars, lining up for bathrooms and such. As the chunky clangs begin to make themselves at home in each ear, Stanley retrieves the case file from within his jacket, quickly flipping it open as Lilian leans in from the side.

“Any theories?”, he asks while blowing out a ring of smoke.

She strokes her chin while scanning across an included written statement. It is desperately, poorly written, nonsensical ramblings on surface level, yet has the potential to be something greener underneath. It recounts a fantastical tale that would give any nearby onlooker an inquisitive chuckle. Several paragraphs in length, it becomes ever so desperately written as it reaches the bottom, which contains few words.

“It could be anything, really. My best guess is a spreading rumor or story reported by some paranoid individual”, Lil replies unsurely.

Stan flips through an evidence section of the folder, nothing attached inside.

“Interview?”, he asks coarsely, looking over to her.

She meets his gaze, shaking head before turning back to the bag atop her lap. He blows air while putting out his cigarette on the hot windowsill. Glancing back to the papers one last time, he pinches the handwritten statement, holding it up to the slowly setting sun. Tilting it back and forth, he notices an odd fingerprint and spot of grease on the material, making him subsequently look down to its final words.

It reads: *“Please help us. We're all turning into fish”*.

Returning it to the case file, he clasps everything back together before handing it to Lilian. Gazing into the view on the opposite side of the train, she lightly jumps before taking, and storing it into her bag. Pulling a window cover down, Stanley leans back in his uncomfortable chair, closing eyes.

Rocketing into the distance, the steamliner trudges ahead to their destination far, far away.