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[Home](#)

[About Us](#)

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[Submit](#)

[Meet the  
Editors](#)

[Issue 23-  
Spring  
2022](#)

[Previous  
Issues](#)

[Join Our  
Team](#)

## Fiction

[back](#)

[Kill Me with Chocolate  
By: Frank Scozzari](#)

[The Ghost Writer  
By: Jedd Cole](#)

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[Home](#)

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[Contact Us](#)

[Submit](#)

[Meet the  
Editors](#)

[Issue 23-  
Spring  
2022](#)

[Previous  
Issues](#)

[Join Our  
Team](#)

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[back](#)

[Kill Me with Chocolate  
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By: Jedd Cole](#)

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[Home](#)

[About Us](#)

[Contact Us](#)

[Submit](#)

[Meet the  
Editors](#)

[Issue 23-  
Spring  
2022](#)

[Previous  
Issues](#)

[Join Our  
Team](#)

[Back](#)

# The Ghost Writer

By: Jedd Cole

A train rattled the walls of Terry's bedroom, rousing him rudely from sleep. He stirred under the sheets agitatedly and looked sidelong to the nightstand and the alarm clock as if it had betrayed him.

6:59 AM.

In frightened submission, the display ticked one minute into the present and then went off in surrender. With a weary growl, Terry slapped its tardy head into silence. Terry lay still, surrendering to consciousness as the train continued vibrating the bed for another long moment, followed by another—another. He decided that when the sound ended, he would get up.

While the time slipped and stumbled away in the raucous din, Terry remembered the first item on his agenda today: the meeting. With that thought in mind, he pondered what he would say:

Hello. As we discussed, I called you here to talk about your writing. The problem? Well, I need you to stop. Because you are writing...well, like me.

He extrapolated a half-dozen various entrances into dialogue until the young man sitting across the table began to grow irritated. Stop talking to me, he said.

What? This is serious. I need you to understand...

Stop talking to me!

Listen here, boy. Just hear me out.

Stop talking to me!

The youth suddenly leaped from the chair, knocking over a glass of water. Out of nowhere he drew a knife, bringing it to Terry's chest and lunging forward—

into waking.

Terry gripped his heart, still beating, alone, in his bedroom. He had drifted back to sleep. Anxious from the half-sleeping nightmare, he looked back at the clock to see how late he had awoken.

7:55 AM.

Terry got up and went to the bathroom, disgruntled now that he had only twenty-five minutes until the meeting. He consciously decided it would go differently than just previously. A quick, hot shower turned his dreaming into vapors that beaded and dripped upon the unobserved ceiling. After drying, he went to the mirror and inspected himself. Salt and pepper stubbled his jaw. He decided to leave it there for now. It gave him a distinguished air, a sort of jaded nobility that he felt suited his public image. A drip from the ceiling landed on his bare shoulder and startled him. As if by design, a knock came simultaneously from the front door. The sun was just coming up, shining crisply through the windows whose blinds he had forgotten to close the night before. Nevertheless, Terry switched on a lamp as he approached the door, which gave another stiff knock.

He opened it.

The young man behind, who had been faceless in his dream, now followed the movement of the arcing door from nervous blue eyes set beneath a perfectly combed cuffure of raven black. His dress was just shy of too formal, and the ends of his black slacks were short of his ankles. There was altogether a sort of eccentric sameness to the young man that put Terry on edge.

"Hello, York was it?" Terry greeted.

The man nodded, "Roark, actually, Victor Roark." His tenor voice was wiry, like an FM radio.

Terry extended his hand, but was unmet by the visitor, who stood awkwardly in the doorway without moving. Smoothly, Terry moved his outstretched arm into an inviting gesture to come in. "Roark, that's right. Forgive me. May I call you Victor, then?"

The guest entered meaningfully and inspected the room in the span of a deep breath.

"Victor is fine, sir."

A seconds-long quiet disturbed the already pitiful flow of superficiality. Terry gestured toward the table joining the living space with the kitchen. "Shall we have a seat, then?"

They moved to the table, its cherry varnish surface alluring from the crystal sun far away. Victor scanned himself, and Terry thought to offer him a drink but thought the better of it, remembering its presence within his dream.

"So," Terry began, realizing he was still standing, and pulling out the opposing chair to take his own seat. "I know we shared a phone call about this, but I thought it would be better to have a face-to-face meeting to conclude."

"I agree completely," Victor replied. His hands remained in his lap under the table.

"Have you considered what I said, then?"

"I have."

"Then you agree to stop your writing?"

Victor looked out the window, squinting into the dawn. "I don't know if a writer can just turn it off. Mr. Ferrows."

Something twitched in Terry's forehead, triggering a bulging vein. "Turn it off? But Victor, you've been copying my material. My ideas."

The man was silent, still looking out the window.

Growing perturbed, Terry tried to calm himself. "See here—I am an established writer in the field, as you well know. I have an agent, I have a publisher, I write for a living. And I have for years. I know you're new to the business, but this plagiarism is frankly against the law." He felt pleased with his quiet tour de force as the senior writer in the room, playing on Terry's fear.

He was bluffing, of course. He doubted in his heart that the law would have anyone to say about the matter.

"I think it's time we faced the issue square on," Victor said, turning back to face the older writer with a different tone. Something in his gaze frightened Terry in its seriousness. The thought about the knife in his dream brought his eyes to the span of the table, to Victor's concealed hands.

"What do you mean?" Terry said.

"I am not the one doing the copying. It is you."

Terry would have laughed if he wasn't so upset. He felt a warm rash bubble up from his toes. "This is ridiculous! You're a thief, and I demand that you withdraw your works and destroy them."

As Terry's voice became more strained, Victor's quieted in equal measure. "One should avoid destroying himself."

It was a threat. Terry was sure of it. He was speechless. He was also sure that Victor was drawing something from beneath the table.

The alarm cut off the action obnoxiously. And he was back in his bed.

Terry slipped his diminutive hood, reading the time: 7:00 AM. The noise of train cars trundled off in the morning distance faintly.

A deep breath, and he arose. What a dream. He didn't know which was worse—being awakened by the end or just before it.

The door knocked.

Terry shot up, snatching his robe and donning it as he flipped the lamp switch in the coolly lit living room. He opened the door, where a youth in a brown delivery uniform with combed black hair and deep blue eyes held a large orange parcel.

"Good morning, Victor," Terry said.

"Good morning, sir. Here's your package. Sign here, please." He handed Terry both the paper package and an electronic signature device. Awkwardly tracing the thing under his arm, Terry scribbled something, certainly not his signature, upon the LCD screen and handed it back to its owner. "Thank you," Victor said, walking away in the cold to a grumbling brown track on the curb.

Terry closed the door and proceeded to open the package, which he knew by its weight, its feel, its shape that it contained manuscripts.

"So soon..." he mumbled, pulling out the papers. A cover letter was the first thing he saw, but through its thin membrane he could see the page underneath, and the color red bleeding through. Removing the top sheet, Terry was shocked by the manuscripts proper, which were marked through with broad red marker strokes.

Every line. Every word. Page after page of red. Upon the margins and through the lines were scrawled the words—

MINE. MINE. MINE.

He felt dead. The sheets of paper slipped from his quaking hands and fluttered heavily to the floor. All around him lay the bloodied editor's notes—

MINE. MINE. MINE.

Red, red, red, all over. And then another knock at the door. It kept knocking, beating, pounding, until it was the sound of a train barreling down a track. The door slowly swung, and there was Victor half concealed with a knife and a hollow, doleful look.

Terry awoke to his reverberating bedroom. The clock read: 6:59 AM. The train passed and hurred ever more softly away.

Urgently, Terry reached over and flipped the alarm switch to circumvent any redundant noise. As he lay in bed a moment, anxiety hovered beside him like a cold bed partner. He sighed, and decided to get out of the house for a walk. His nerves were bothering him, probably from his restless sleep, and the cool dawn air would do him good. Maybe he would snatch an idea for his next story—and then he could write.

Terry skipped the shower and put on some pants, a turtleneck and a jacket, then headed for the living room and the door where his shoes were. He picked them up from where they lay on the threshold, and while he was tying the laces he noticed something on the table.

It was an orange manuscript parcel.

He thought to go take a look at it, since he could not remember receiving it. But as he thought, he changed his mind. It would still be there when he got back.

The door gave way to the muffled brilliance of dawn. The sun was just coming up over the mountainous horizon as Terry sauntered down the steps from his porch and onto the sidewalk. The neighborhood was especially quiet, empty. Houses like his lined the street as it stretched straight before him and turned some ways off under a thin blanket of falling mist from the neighbors' lawns.

He walked for some time, finally reaching a point in the street after it curved, where a fallen part of the sidewalk overlooked the city. Terry leaned upon the rail as was his custom. Below, a cliff some hundreds of feet high that terminated in a road that skirted the city. Beyond, skyline fingers groped at the sun and the clouds and the invisible stars. Some lights still glowed like prodigal eyes in the umbra of the early morning.

Footsteps approached. Before Terry finished turning his head to greet the stranger,

Victor's voice abruptly spoke: "You missed our appointment."

Dumbfounded, Terry retreated a step instinctively. The young man was dressed in slacks and a wrinkled white shirt with a loose tie. His black hair disheveled like he had been running his hands through it. The blue eyes did not break their stare, and it aroused in Terry an animal fear.

"It's time we seriously discussed your writing," Victor said, taking another step closer.

"What—?"

"Our appointment. Don't you remember?"

Terry blinked. He half-remembered a dream—talking with Victor on the phone. I'm giving you a chance to stop this infringement. You can't just steal someone's creative property.

I am not.

You are. I don't know how, but you are. I'm an established writer, and you don't have the legal ability to pursue this any further. I like to think of myself as kind, so I'm giving you a chance to walk away, but...

I am not stealing. I am who I am.

Do you know what a ghostwriter is, Mr. Roark?

Excuse me, Mr. Ferrows, but I do. I know all too well.

Terry suddenly could not remember which was a memory and which was a dream. He recalled sitting across the table from Victor—a knife—red-marked paper around him like blood—but he could not make any sense of the images.

"Have we met before?" Terry asked, growing worried.

Victor nodded slowly. "Yes. A long time ago. Don't you remember?"

Terry gulped. "I'm having a hard time remembering right now."

"You want me to stop my writing. But I can't stop. You're the only one who's writing. Mr. Ferrows."

The man began moving closer.

"What do you mean?"

"I can't destroy myself. Not as long as you keep writing."

Alarmed and confused, Terry pleaded, "I didn't want you to do that—just to stop copying my material, stealing my ideas before they even made it to the publisher. How should I stop writing?"

"Because you're the only one who's writing."

Quickly, in an eye blink, Victor had lunged forward and grabbed his arms, trying to move him to the rail as if to throw him. Driven to flight, Terry resisted with animal rage, almost slipping from the youth's unsteady grip—but not quite. With a mortal gleam in his eyes, Victor squeezed, and then jumped over the rail, bringing Terry with him.

The world inverted and sped downward in the paralysis of expectation. Just before he saw the horizon meet the level of his eyes, he heard Victor shout: "Stop stealing me!"

An electric shock.

Terry opened his eyes wide and his whole body jumped, through prone in bed. He caught his breath and groaned. "Stop...dreaming," he said, thumping his head with the butt of his palm. He looked wearily at the alarm clock, which read:

6:59 AM. Victor was standing next to it.

"I told you to stop," he said, "but you would not listen."

Terry could not move, neither could he feel—he was trapped. All the other images rushed back through his mind in a blur of fear and riddle. "Who are you?" he asked, desperate.

"I am Victor Roark, I am who I am. I was in the first story that you stole."

A tense pause. "Wait." Terry felt the rich of resolution beginning to creep in.

"When you moved into his house. You found a box full of his stories."

"No...no..."

"You took them for yourself. And you published them in your own name. The only reason you're an established writer is because you stole. You stole me. All of us."

"No..."

"Don't you remember me? The detective didn't survive the final chapter. Remember?"

"The murderer...the ghostwriter..." Terry's mouth became dried cotton.

"Yes. I can't let you keep writing us. Stealing us."

A knife glinted in the dark. Terry put up his hands and was about to appeal once more. The time was 7:00 AM. The alarm sounded.

Victor was upon, straddling and pinning him to the bed as Terry writhed involuntarily, vainly to get free. A stab like lightning in the dark. Pain like needles, hammers, claws—another—another.

A fluttering like wings, and Victor was gone. In his place, a hundred sheets of paper fell around Terry onto the bed, around the bed, filling the whole room. Each sheet was full of words, and each line was marked through with red.

Terry shuddered as his life dripped away from his chest and into the covers, the papers, until he could no longer tell if the marks were from the ink or from himself. Himself, spreading like lies into a great stain upon the fiction.

He looked at the alarm clock, wondering if this too, was fiction—if, when his vision faded, he would awake again in his bed, if he would be alone, or if he would be haunted still.