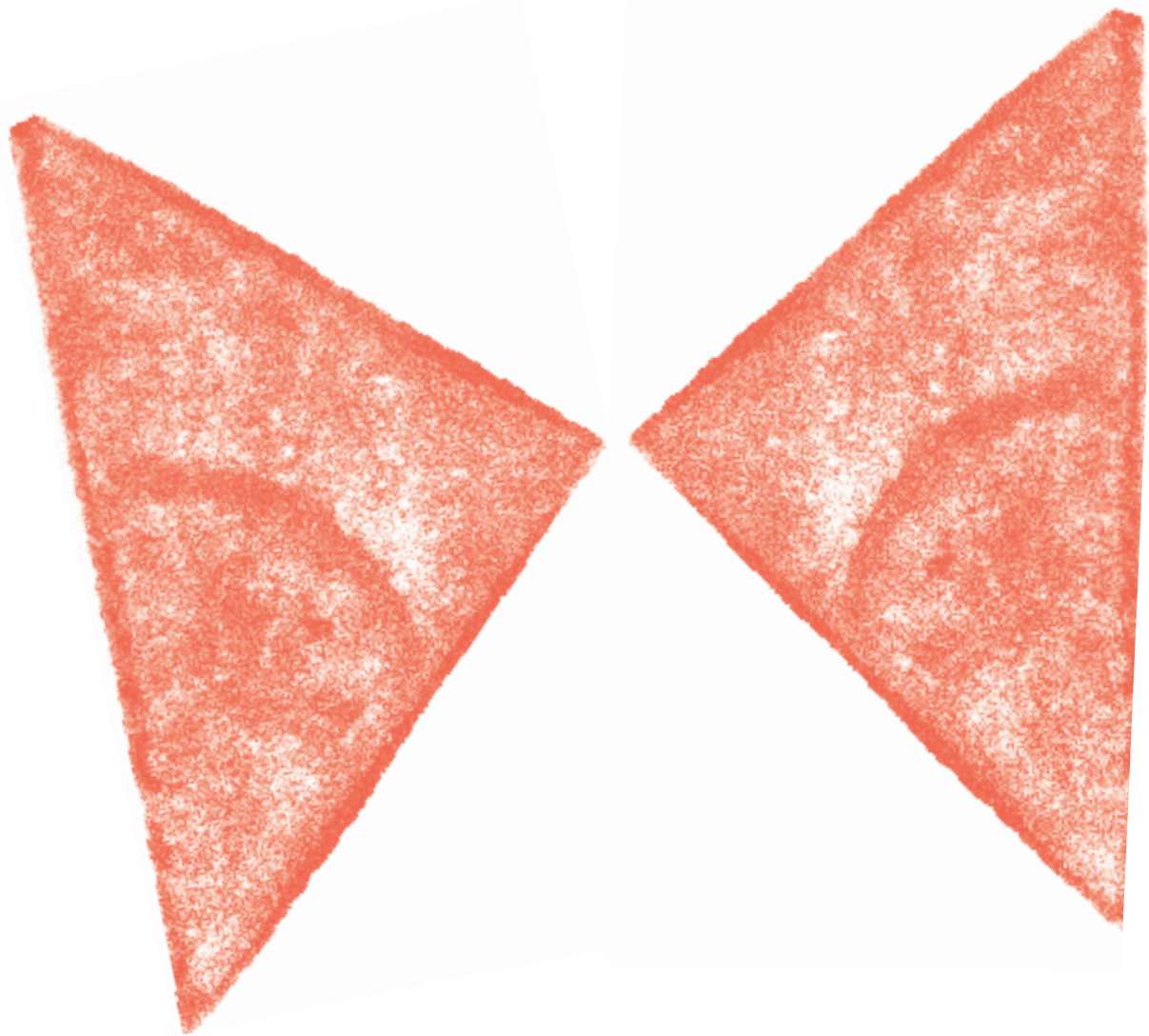


Bow Ties

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Writing Matters



It was the day after his little sister's birthday when Mark realized that he wanted to sew bow ties. It was a sunny day, and they played a new game, which Mark's little sister got from their uncle as a gift. She got so excited about the game that she couldn't fall asleep.

"Do you know the name of this game, Mark?" his sister asked. She always asked him questions, even when she had already known the answer. "Of course, I do! It is called battledore and shuttlecock". His little sister started to laugh: "What a funny name, Mark!" she said. Then they started to play and tried to bat the shuttlecock from one side to the other without letting it fall on the ground. "Don't bat it so high, Mark! I cannot catch it up there", his little sister complained. "You should grow up faster, little sister", Mark answered with a smile.

They spent the whole day outside, completely losing the track of time. When they came back home in the evening, their faces were red from the sun.

"It must have been hot in your suit today, Mark," his little sister said when they both were laying in their beds. "Don't worry. I still prefer my suit over being sunburnt all over my body".

The truth was that Mark never took off his suit before going to sleep. He did it after his grandpa who wore this suit till his death. Mark didn't remember a single day his grandpa was not wearing the suit. Before he died, Mark used to ask him for stories about his life. He was really interested in everything old and posh. And because his grandpa knew about Mark's taste, he always started the stories with the words: "When men were still proud of wear-

ing a bow tie...” On this evening, Mark was thinking about the old stories of his grandpa, and suddenly the idea of sewing bow ties popped in his mind. And he knew that it was meant to be.

* * *

The next morning, Mark secretly visited his parents’ sleeping room to search for his father’s bow tie. There were not many things in their wardrobe, so it was easy to find it. He tied it around his neck and went downstairs for breakfast. When he entered the room, his two brothers looked at him and started to laugh. “Look, how fantastic our odd fish is dressed up today”, his brother said ironically. “Soon, he can lay in the grave next to grandpa.”

Mark put his headphones on his ears and turned on his Walkman with old CDs. “Why are you always listening to that old music, Mark?” his mother greeted him: “Isn’t there any better?”

Mark left the kitchen without having his breakfast and went out on the street. On his way to school, he met some of his classmates. It was almost impossible not to meet anyone on the street, because all the children in the town were always walking to school. Usually, Mark tried to avoid meeting other children of his age.

“Hey, weirdo!” someone called him. Mark took off his headphones. “Excuse me? I couldn’t hear you, Branden”.


“What is that thing around your neck?”

“It is my bow tie. I want to sew bow ties in the future.”

The children around Mark started laughing. Mark regretted being honest for the second time on this day.

“Are you kidding me?” one of them asked. “Who in the hell will





ever buy that shit in this shitville?”

Mark didn't answer.

“Don't you wanna talk to us, weirdo? Do you think we are not good enough for you? Do you think you are better than us? Do you think...”

Mark couldn't listen to it anymore. His stomach tightened. His lips felt numb and in his mouth was a sour taste. “Ex...cuse me...” he stammered, still in his polite speaking, “I...I need to go”.

“We have the same way, no worries, weirdo”, someone said, and the others followed Mark in laughter.

It was not the first time for Mark to be surrounded by others who made fun of him. Sometimes, they just let him go away after a while – sometimes not.

This time he was lucky, and they stopped laughing at him when they reached school.

After school, Mark walked home. One of his arms hurt. When he arrived back home, his little sister was already waiting on him. She jumped up and down, shouted his name, and started running. Every day she awaited him in this way, her eyes were sparkling.

“Can we play in the garden, Mark?” she asked.

“I don't have time, little sister”, Mark answered.

“What's wrong, Mark?”

He didn't want to tell her about his day. She was the only person who didn't care about his special appearance and taste. She never said anything bad about Mark. And the most important and remarkable thing about her was that she preferred to spend her time with him instead of with other brothers. Sometimes her love reminded Mark his own love he had for his grandpa.

When Mark was still a small child, he used to follow his grandpa

everywhere, just as his little sister does to him now. Every Sunday, his grandpa woke up early in the morning, even though it wasn't a working day. He got dressed in his suit and started to shave. Mark sat next to him in the bathroom, watching his grandpa's face in the mirror. He saw, how carefully his grandpa shaved every single hair on his face. Mark remembered how graceful these moments seemed to him. How much he enjoyed watching his grandfather getting ready before going out. To see, how elegant his grandpa still was, despite his old age. Mark envied that. He was already waiting for his first beard. Every day after he got up, he ran to the mirror in the bathroom to inspect his face. But nothing was growing there. Not even now.

"Mark?"

Silence.

"Ma-ark?"

"I don't want to talk about it, little sister".

"Can we play in the garden then, Mark?"

"Sure".

* * *

In the evening, the whole family had dinner. The table in the kitchen was never big enough for all of them, and everyone tried to sit as close as possible to the food to get some. Mark sat there silent, trying not to attract attention.

"I was playing in the garden with Mark, mommy", his little sister said. Failure. Mark's mother looked at him sceptically. "I can see that", she said, pointing at Mark's dirty suit. In the afternoon,



Mark had fallen into the mud behind the water barrel next to his mother's vegetable garden when he played horses with his little sister. "I told you that you should not wear that suit outside in the garden, Mark!" Mark looked down. "I will wash it tonight", he murmured. It was the only time when Mark could wash his suit, so it could dry over the night and be ready to wear again the next morning.

His brother took the last piece of meat before Mark could have any. "Do you know what Mark's new dream is, mum?" his brother asked. "He wants to become a sewing lady". Everyone laughed except Mark's little sister. Mark felt an upcoming heat in his stomach, but he didn't want to fight with his brother.

"What does that mean, Mark?" his mother asked. She raised her eyebrows.

"I want to sew bow ties", he said. "I think I am meant to, and grandpa always knew that, even before I knew it!"

Now it was said. Mark felt afraid and relieved at the same time – till his mother started to talk. "Do you think, this will help our family, Mark? Are you really so naive and selfish? Who should finance this venture? To whom should it bring something to eat? Do you really think that there is a single person in our town who cares about bow ties?" His mother's voice turned shrill. Then there was silence. No one said anything. Not even Mark's brothers.

Then Mark said softly "I do," and his mother exploded.

* * *

Mark went out of his parents' house. He walked along the streets in the small town. His arm still hurt, but he didn't care about it. He

knew that it was his destiny to sew bow ties. It had always been his dream. He just didn't know about it before. But now, there was nothing else he could think of.

Mark didn't see the man who was also walking on the street. Until he ran into him.

"I am sorry!" he exclaimed, startled.

"It's alright," the stranger answered. He looked down on Mark, and his face turned into a smile.

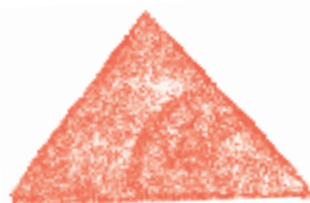
"I know this suit," he said. "It used to belong to my uncle when I was a kid."

"That cannot be true. This suit belonged to my grandpa", Mark said irritated.

"Yeah, it is! I remember these bottoms and the small pockets here". The stranger pointed at Mark's chest where someone sewed small pockets into the jacket.

Mark wanted to tell the stranger that it cannot be the suit of someone's uncle, because his grandpa bought it in Italy. He remembered his grandpa's voice when he was talking about that time. It was something special at that time to travel, and his grandpa was the only man from the whole town who had ever been to Italy. His voice was proud, and so was he.

"My uncle's wife sewed that small pockets on the suit, because my uncle always lost his wedding ring", the stranger continued. "He worked in a funeral home, and sometimes he had to take off his ring. For reasons of hygiene", he added with a smile. He looked at Mark and noticed his speechless face. "Sorry boy, I didn't want to bother you with this old story. It just came up to my mind, and I haven't thought about my uncle for a long time. You know, he died many years ago, when he was still a young man. God bless,

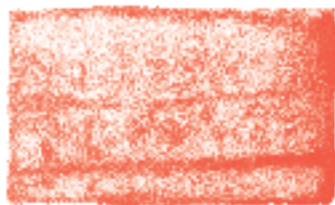


Arnold". He made a cross on his chest. For a moment he seemed sad, but then his face changed again, and he got excited. "Before my uncle died, he told me once that he gave that suit to an old friend of his. He said that his friend was in trouble, and he didn't have much money and property. It was a gift from my uncle to his friend. And I think this friend must have been your grandfather!" Mark didn't know what to answer. He didn't want to hear what this man was telling him. First, he didn't believe any of his words, but then there was an inner voice which told him that the stranger is telling the truth, and suddenly Mark knew that it is right. It was not the stranger lying to him, but his grandpa who was.

Mark ran away. He didn't want to hear a single word anymore. He didn't want to hear that everything he had worshiped was based on a lie. His dream was based on a lie.

When he couldn't run anymore, he slowed down and tried to breathe. He felt something wet on his cheeks and wiped it off with his hands. In the distance he could see the sunset.

He recalled the day when he was wearing his grandpa's suit for the first time. It was on the day of his grandpa's funeral. The morning was quite hectic, and his mum gave him the suit. "I cannot wear grandpa's suit today", he resisted, but his mum just showed him a face which no one should fight against and Mark knew that there was nothing else for him to wear. His wardrobe consisted only of old clothes that had already lost their colour. From that day he started to wear that suit every day like his grandpa did before, and he almost forgot why he once had to take it.



It was slowly getting dark when Mark finally decided to walk back home. His cheeks were dry again, but he felt empty. He didn't know what to say to his family. He didn't know how to continue his life with dreams which are based on a big lie. Mark felt ashamed. His steps became slower and slower.

When he reached home, his little sister was waiting on him. She jumped up and down, shouted his name and started to run. She awaited him with sparkling eyes. Like every other day.



WRITING MATTERS

Workshop Led by Jan Carson
Coordinated by Dr. Petra Zaus & Antonios Smyrnaio

The mission of the Writing Matters initiative is twofold: exploring “matters” pertaining to writing practices and underscoring that writing “matters” as a powerful means of engaging with the world.

During the 2021 summer semester, the award-winning author Jan Carson convened a Writing Matters workshop for students at the JMU Würzburg. Carson emphasized developing structure, characterization, and narratology, but also community. When writing together, Carson observed, you find “a whole community of other people who see the world a little bit the same as you and suddenly it doesn’t feel as lonely anymore.” The short stories that emerged in this workshop are published here as chapbooks in the first of an ongoing series of publications that feature student work from the Writing Matters workshop series.

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