

# **Becoming a Writer**

By Junot Diaz

It wasn't that I couldn't write. I wrote every day. I actually worked really hard at writing. At my desk by 7 A.M., would work a full eight and more. Scribbled at the dinner table, in bed, on the toilet, on the No. 6 train, at Shea Stadium. I did everything I could. But none of it worked. My novel, which I had started with such hope shortly after publishing my first book of stories, wouldn't budge past the 75-page mark. Nothing I wrote past page 75 made any kind of sense. Nothing. Which would have been fine if the first 75 pages hadn't been pretty damn cool. But they were cool, showed a lot of promise. Would also have been fine if I could have just jumped to something else. But I couldn't. All the other novels I tried sucked worse than the stalled one, and even more disturbing, I seemed to have lost the ability to write short stories. It was like I had somehow slipped into a No-Writing Twilight Zone and I couldn't find an exit. Like I'd been chained to the sinking ship of those 75 pages and there was no key and no patching the hole in the hull. I wrote and I wrote and I wrote, but nothing I produced was worth a damn.

Want to talk about stubborn? I kept at it for five straight years. Five damn years. Every day failing for five years? I'm a pretty stubborn, pretty hard-hearted character, but those five years of fail did a number on my psyche. On me. Five years, 60 months? It just about wiped me out. By the end of that fifth year, perhaps in an attempt to save myself, to escape my despair, I started becoming convinced that I had written all I had to write, that I was a minor league Ralph Ellison, a Pop Warner Edward Rivera, that maybe it was time, for the sake of my mental health, for me to move on to another profession, and if the inspiration struck again some time in the future...well, great. But I knew I couldn't go on much more the way I was going. I just couldn't. I was living with my fiancée at the time (over now, another terrible story) and was so depressed and self-loathing I could barely function. I finally broached the topic with her of, maybe, you know, doing something else. My fiancée was so desperate to see me happy (and perhaps more than a little convinced by my fear that maybe the thread had run out on my talent) that she told me to make a list of what else I could do besides writing. I'm not a list person like she was, but I wrote one. It took a month to pencil down three things. (I really don't have many other skills.) I stared at that list for about another month. Waiting, hoping, praying for the book, for my writing, for my talent to catch fire. A last-second reprieve. But nada. So I put the manuscript away. All the hundreds of failed pages, boxed and hidden in a closet. I think I cried as I did it. Five years of my life and the dream that I had of myself, all down the tubes because I couldn't pull off something other people seemed to pull off with relative ease: a novel. By then I wasn't even interested in a Great American Novel. I would have been elated with the eminently forgettable NJ novel.

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