

SEPARATION ANXIETY

By Mameve Medwed

My third novel has gone into production; all the decisions over commas and semicolons and adjectives and verbs are now irrevocable, cast into the stone of twelve point Galliard. You've lived so long with your characters, my friends say, it must be hard to let them go, like sending a child off to college, shoving a bird from its nest. Piece of cake, I answer, and kick that manuscript out the door. What I don't confess is the toughest hurdle—weaning myself from my editor. Like Tony Soprano, I've got issues. Separation anxiety. It doesn't take a shrink to draw the connection between editor/writer and analyst/analysand. Oh, fellow scribblers, there's a whole lot of transference going on.

I used to think the mailman played the crucial role in a writer's psyche. As the deliverer of contributor's copies or publisher's checks and the inflictor of returned self-addressed stamped envelopes, he was the center of my debut novel and of my literary life. Blame such folly on first novelist naiveté. With the third, comes enlightenment: the editor's the sole axis around which my writer's planet spins. The book's done; the therapeutic reach-out-and-touch via phone, fax, and email that has transported me daily to the editorial couch is about to end. Less cold turkey than a gentle easing off as from a drug, this termination's not Schwarzenegger but Freudian.

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Editorial addiction/ dependence/ transference mimics a progressive disease, its symptoms—anxiety, neediness, thumb sucking--turn more pathological with each book. The first novel is like a first date. You're on your best behavior. You refuse to be a pest. To dispute an editorial suggestion would count as blasphemy. Yes, right, I should have seen that myself, you genuflect. Crying thank you, you fall prostrate at your editor's tweedy knees. You're determined to be the no frills, no fuss author-- editor's pet.

With each succeeding book, however, all those layers of civility, of Emily Post, of superego are stripped bare to pure naked, whiny, demanding id. You scribble stets in all the margins, pressing your pencil down hard. Logic is secondary to the rhythm of the sentence, you instruct and punch your redial button for the third time that hour.

In my real life I'm a certifiable grown-up—longtime marriage, children, house, friends, flashlights with up-to-date batteries, orange juice in the refrigerator and extra toilet paper stashed in the back hall. There, the center of my universe is my husband, my kids. In my parallel publishing world, however, I'm not a certifiable grown-up, just simply certifiable. And my attachment to my editor—and my fear of losing him when the book is finished-- eclipses everything.

In this, I'm not alone. A critically acclaimed memoirist needs to talk to his editor every day, even when he doesn't have a book. "Idle chatter—just to touch base," he explains, setting off my own sugar plum dreams of regularly scheduled sessions with the object of my idolatry. Another novelist and I devised a numerical code of complaints to cover all things both domestic and editorial. Number one: editor doesn't phone back; number two: editor doesn't answer email. Number three: editor doesn't sound

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enthusiastic. At the bottom of the list lie husbands and malfunctioning appliances. Since my co-complainer lives outside the local area code, this is an economical system.

"Number one," I announce. "Number three," she says, and instant understanding and empathy crackle over the line.

One picaresque novelist's editor kissed her full on the lips in the cab to a bookseller's dinner.

"Tongue?" I asked. "Yes," she said, and added "Ugh." Which didn't fool me. "How awful," I commiserated. Which didn't fool her.

A poet I carpooled with used to gripe, during her eight years of therapy, about the patient who preceded her every Tuesday morning. "I'm sure my doctor likes her better than me," she sighed. I can sympathize. Sibling rivalry has nothing over us writers vying for our editor's apron strings. Did my editor talk four minutes with the chick lit satirist and only three and a half with me? Do the words nice scene that flag my paragraph show up as I love this next to the sentences of somebody else? Writing is not a competitive sport, claimed Cheever. True enough. Nevertheless, though one good book doesn't crowd out another, one author's niche in an editor's heart may take up too much space to accommodate B through Z in his Rolodex. I'm too old for this, far too mature, I groan as I regress into infancy.

But if I'm too old, my editor is too young-- a boy who could be one of my kids, a whippersnapper not even thirty now and just out of college when he first red-penciled my manuscript. What does it mean that it's this baby who's shoring me up? This person who was born after I started sending out stories in self-addressed stamped envelopes? Not to

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mention the craziness of parsing sex scenes with someone the age of your son. Yet, despite his tender years, he remains the archetypal father figure, wise, kind, patient, while I carry on like a teen. And agonize like one, too: will he call? Will he like this? Will he hate that? Will he think I'm a dork?

"This is a business relationship," my husband counsels so firmly I wonder if he suspects the waffling of my allegiances. Yes, I want to reply, but it's also so much more-- a kind of reverse therapy in which the author gets paid to vent. And, at times, a relationship very close to love. Still, what the editor gains from this one-way street, besides the book, is a topic fit for a novelist.

When the book's published, the umbilical cord will be cut. I'm going to miss you, I confess. Even though he's only a phone call, fax, email away, we both understand that this old gang of ours is breaking up. Until the next one, he consoles. The sooner you get to work, the sooner we can start all over again. I switch on my computer. Perhaps the reason we keep writing is the lure of a return ticket to the editorial womb.

In the early onset of my dependence, right before my first book was about to hit the stores, I went to a conference on publishing. A panel of editors spoke to a packed auditorium. One editor in particular stood out; a legend with a fellowship named after her and scores of grateful authors testifying to her brilliance in dedications and acknowledgments. "I'm always available for my authors, day or night," she intoned. My heart leapt up.

At the reception afterwards, I found her alone by the crudités. "I loved your talk," I gushed. "I love how you spoke about your authors." She nodded and chewed on a floret

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of cauliflower. Clearly she had expended so much devotion on behalf of her authors that she didn't have the energy to chat with me. I looked around. Nobody came to my rescue. I went on. I told her about my book ready to come out, about my editor whom I worshipped, who was as available and kind to me as she was to her own cherished writers. My editor was so welcoming, I explained, that I could pick up the phone at the drop of a clause. My eyes brimmed with adoration. The renowned editor scooped up hummus with her carrot stick. I continued, struggling to fill the silence, not knowing how to stop. At last she stepped back. "You do understand, dear," she said, in a voice you'd use to talk a sniper down from a roof, "that you are not the only author the editor has. That there are other writers on her list."

"Of course, I do," I declared. I ticked off all the competing demands on an editor who, like the legend in front of me, might still offer up to his writers the phone numbers for his August rental at the beach.

The legend put down her carrot. Her eyes widened in alarm. She took another step back. "Dear," she asked, "Do you have someone at home? Someone you can talk to?" And then she fled.

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