



“Murder your darlings.”
— Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch

Dear Faithful Reader,

In the first draft of my inaugural novel, *Steel Fear*, Part I ends with a scene of Chief Finn, curled up asleep on an exterior catwalk. To give you the full effect, let’s take a look at that closing passage here in full:

In the dead of night, the USS *Abraham Lincoln* emerged from the eastern mouth of the Strait of Hormuz into the Gulf of Oman and from there out to sea. Wrapped in his standard-issue blue wool blanket on the steel-webbed catwalk deck, Finn slept.

Up on the flight deck men in colored jerseys moved around busily, executing the intricate choreography of their war dance, hurling and catching the great bombing machines in endless twenty-five-second cycles.

Far below, hidden deep in chambers most of the crew never saw, nuclear goblins ate away at the radioactive core, uranium atoms careening into each other, the *crash!* of their collision followed nanoseconds later by a *whoosh!* as they split apart and released their explosive force. If one were to shrink oneself down to the scale of an atom, one might observe that it very much resembled the contained chaos happening on the flight deck overhead as planes whooshed into the black sky and crashed back down.

Along its cavernous underbelly the ship’s twin turbines spun without cease, magic spindles in a dark fairy tale, sending their kinetic energy darting over steam pipes and electrical wires throughout the ship’s fifty-plus acres of workspace. At the stern, deep down below the fantail, the four great brass propellers churned the black water as the beast sliced its way through the ocean. A sea monster. A kraken.

Around the ship bioluminescence danced in the water, whispering its luciferous messages.

Camouflage! Distraction! Misdirection!

Now, if you happened to read *Steel Fear* and you don’t immediately recognize that passage, there’s a very good reason.

It isn't there.

Understand, I *loved* this passage. It was my favorite passage in the entire draft. And it was my editor who finally broke the news: it had to go. It was a lovely bit of writing. It just didn't work. "This is a thriller," she said. "Right here, at the end of Part I, you need to be propelling the plot forward — not stopping to contemplate the scenery."

And she was right. I tossed the passage and wrote something completely different to end Part I, which is what you'll find in the published book.

That passage, the one I loved and had to let go of, was a perfect example of the quote that tops this month's newsletter. Here's how Sir Arthur puts it, in the line that precedes his famous "murder your darlings" quote:

"Whenever you feel an impulse to perpetrate a piece of exceptionally fine writing, obey it—wholeheartedly—and delete it before sending your manuscript to press."

Every time Reading Quiller-Couch's mandate again reminds me of another scene, this one from real life: myself, having a conversation with a judge while a gallery of silent onlookers observed.

At the time I owned a company that published a monthly magazine, *Solstice*, that wrote about health and environmental issues. (This was back in the eighties, and I was trying to sound the alarm on climate change.) As I set about eagerly growing my subscription base, aiming for the stars, an opportunity arose to buy out my chief competitor. With a little fancy leveraged financing, I did so, quadrupling our circulation overnight.

I couldn't keep up with the growth. It buried me.

And now here I was, in bankruptcy court, having a frank discussion with the judge about the disposition of my debts.

That company, that magazine, was my pride and joy. Nothing wrong with a little joy, even a lot of joy. But the pride part: that can be tricky. I'd thought that financed buyout was a pretty nifty little maneuver. But it didn't fit the narrative of my life. Just like that pretty nifty little passage didn't fit the narrative of *Steel Fear*.

They were both darlings. And they both had to go.

At one point in *The Vagrant*, the hero, Bob, reads an inscription someone has scribbled into a book he's found in the homeless shelter where he currently resides:

Humility is when you get your ego in perspective.

Humiliation is when you don't, and the world has to do it for you.

Bankruptcy court was an experience of *humiliation*. Choosing to forego the purchase of my competitor's business, recognizing that I would be biting off more than I could chew: that would have been *humility*.

Darlings are tough to recognize precisely because we are so enamored with them. They *feel right*, we say, but it's not really true. They feel *good*, perhaps. But not right. We always know, somewhere deep down inside, but we don't always listen.

Sometimes our beliefs and opinions are darlings. We hold on for dear life, because they "feel right." They are our pride and joy.

And hey, not every opinion, not every ambitious business move, not every florid descriptive passage is a darling. Sometimes they feel right because they *are* right, because they fit, and they are not "pride and joy" but simply joy. Humility is also the discernment to sense the difference.

Which, when it fails (because it will at least sometimes), is why we have editors and friends, those around us whom we trust to tell us the truth and through whose compassionate eyes we get better and better at seeing the truth for ourselves.

That's one reason we marry: to live our lives with someone nearby who often knows us better than we know ourselves.

My coauthor Dan says that when he went to his wife and announced that he had decided he wanted to write a book on humility, she burst out laughing. I get the biggest kick out of that story; it makes me smile every time I think of it. It's making me smile right now.

My September wish for you: that you take a few moments every day to appreciate yourself, with all your blemishes and scars, faults and foibles and failings — not your ego, but the you behind the ego.

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*** ABOUT THE WRITER**

Sir Arthur Thomas Quiller-Couch was born in Cornwall, England, in 1863. Active politically, working for the Liberal Party, he attended Oxford and went on to become a fixture of the British literary establishment for decades. In 1910, at the age of 47, he was knighted by the queen, an event described by *The New York Times* this way:

In the recent royal award of honors to Britons who have served their country well in various fields of endeavor the slender but treasured dignity of knighthood falls upon ARTHUR THOMAS QUILLER-COUCH of the delectable duchy of Cornwall. "Q" is now "Sir Q" and has won his splendid spur ... He is an Oxford man, a yachtsman, a Justice of the Peace, an English gentleman, in short, who will wear his knighthood well.

(Yeah, that's how they wrote the newspaper in those days.)

Writing under the pseudonym “Q” — shades of James Bond’s quirky arms supplier — Quiller-Couch published parodies and comic novels, fairy tales and romances, adventures and poetry, and a great deal more. He completed an unfinished novel of Robert Louis Stevenson’s and then, in a lovely bit of biographical irony, left behind an unfinished work of his own, a modern retelling of the Tristan and Iseult myth, later completed by Daphne du Maurier. As English professor at the University of Cambridge, where he was regarded as a bit of an eccentric, he had among his students a young Alistair Cooke, later of *Masterpiece Theatre* fame. Kenneth Grahame, author of the beloved children’s book *The Wind in the Willows*, confessed to Q’s daughter that he based the astute, affable character “Ratty” on Quiller-Couch.

Despite his massively prolific catalogue of original works, Q is today best known for his literary criticism and his epic compilation, *The Oxford Book of English Verse* — and especially for an admonition drawn from one of his lectures, consisting of just three words, which have been cited by generations of writers for over a century.

Upon his appointment to Cambridge, Quiller-Couch delivered a lecture series that was later published as *The Art of Writing*, from whence comes this passage:

If you here require a practical rule of me, I will present you with this: “Whenever you feel an impulse to perpetrate a piece of exceptionally fine writing, obey it—wholeheartedly—and delete it before sending your manuscript to press. Murder your darlings.”

Or, as Bob’s unseen inscription-scribbler in *The Vagrant* might have put it: When you can, choose humility over humiliation.