

## Incomplete Sentence

You have the misfortune of having been born a period. You're not entirely pleased with this state of affairs and on the last day of your twenty-ninth year you realize just how thoroughly displeased you are. For while you're certainly the most used punctuation mark you're also the least admired. There's something simply unentertaining about you. You're overly stoic by nature. Serious. Final. With you The Buck Stops Here. Period.

It's not the same for Comma. Comma's livelier. When she goes to a party she wants it to continue all night. You simply stand around waiting for the evening to end. You consider yourself a horrible dancer. Question Mark has that cute bob and curl she does. Percentage Mark does a funky lean and slide. Comma knows how to go down low. You just stand there turning back and forth uncomfortably.

You go out for coffee to discuss your mid-sentence crisis with Exclamation Mark. "I'm depressed," you tell him. You explain how anytime a sentence starts getting experimental you ruin it.

"Come on! You're great!" Exclamation Mark yells. People turn their heads to look at you.

"It's easy for you to be upbeat," you say morosely. "You're always the life of the party."

"Cheer up, man!" Exclamation Mark yells. "We need you!"

Question Mark ends up being of equally little help when you call her later that evening. "How are you?" she asks.

“Awful,” you admit. “I keep wondering what life would’ve been like if I’d been born a Greater Than Sign.”

“Don’t you think we all feel that way sometimes?”

“No. Everyone likes you. You ask people to tell you things. You keep conversation going. I never ask people how they are. I just end all dialogue.”

“Why do you think that is?” Question Mark asks.

It’s typical of her. Sometimes you wish she’d just come out and say what she thinks rather than acting like a therapist. After hanging up you realize you should’ve invited her over for a drink. She’s tall and you like her curves. Perhaps sharing some vowels is what you need. You decide to call Comma instead. She might not have the body of Question Mark but you like her petiteness. You scan through your call-list and dial Comma’s number.

“Hi there,” you say.

“Oh hey, I was totally just thinking of you because I was watching TV, this show on PBS about monkeys in Japan, you know, the type that like to sit in hot steam baths all day when it snows and just sit there relaxing, completely looking like they’re businessmen at some ultra-rich resort, and so when I pressed the power button to turn it on I thought of you because it sort of has the same shape as you, round and all, though I guess the power button is really hollow and, well, don’t take that the wrong way, because I totally don’t consider you hollow or anything, but—”

“Tomorrow’s my birthday,” you interrupt. “I was hoping you might come over and have a drink with me tonight.”

“Really, wow, you know I’m so into the night before birthdays because, it’s like, if you stay up till midnight you really get to have two birthdays, even though I guess

technically only one day is really your birthday, and I'd love to come celebrate with you, I'll just jump in the shower and then I'll come over, and I can stop by a liquor store on the way and pick up a bottle of, oh damn, I totally shouldn't have told you that, I should've made it a surprise, well so much for that surprise, but if you want—"

"Don't worry about it. I've got some wine here," you say. After hanging up you clean up your sentences. You throw unnecessary adjectives in the trash and hide your clichés. The buzzer sounds and you let Comma in. She's looking great. Her high heels make her look almost like Apostrophe. You drink for a while together. Conversation is a bit awkward. You attempt a couple run-ons and try to act more like Comma and less like the serious Period you are but it's forced. You lean in for a kiss. You like the way she puts her hands against the curve of your font.

"I just love how round you are," Comma says rubbing your body, "you're so solid, whole, strong, just like a bullet point, and I really like that in a punctuation mark because—"

"Let's move into bedroom," you say.

Comma goes to the bathroom to slip into something more comfortable. You light candles and the flames flicker against the margins of your room. Comma arrives and pauses by the doorway. She's wearing a see-through Lucida Handwritten font. She climbs into bed and takes off your font. She gets on top of you and begins rocking.

"Mmm, that feels good," Comma says as she pushes against you. She begins to rock more quickly. The pauses in her sentences are becoming pronounced. "Ohhhh yes, don't stop," Comma says. You can tell she's not ready to finish her sentences but you feel the end of the paragraph quickly approaching. Oh jeez. You try to think of anything to make your lines last longer. Parenthesis. Modifiers. Independent clauses. You struggle

to remember long passages from *Finnegan's Wake*. You can't keep going though. You know the next sentence will be the last you can manage. Interrupting Comma's increasingly intense pauses you end the paragraph.

You're embarrassed at having finished the previous paragraph so quickly. Lying next to Comma you feel like a typo. "Sorry," you say.

"It's okay, we can always try again later, like who knows, maybe I'll wake you up while you're sleeping, or tomorrow we can try with you on top, or," Comma continues. She talks and talks now but you feel sleep overtaking you. As the candles flicker you allow yourself to slip into the empty space break of sleep.

"Surprise!" the punctuation marks shout when you walk through your parents' front door.

"Whoa," you say. No matter how hard you try you can never act surprised.

"Happy 30<sup>th</sup>!" Exclamation Mark yells and slaps you on the back. Your father, Stress Mark, approaches you. "Not bad kid, but let me ask you something, Now that you're thirty, you think you're gonna get started on your story?"

"Oh leave him be. My big man, I remember when you were just a little boy . . ." your mother, Ellipsis, says and gives you a peck on the cheek.

"Hey there, short stuff. Still ending everyone's fun sentences?" You'd know your older brother's voice anywhere. At Sign. He saunters over with a drink.

"At least I'm in a sentence."

"Psh, who needs sentences when you've got e-mail?" Your brother swirls the ice in his scotch and takes a sip. Trying to look sophisticated. What a creep. Your brother was always the weirdo when you were growing up. For years after graduating he

couldn't get placed in a story anywhere. He worked part-time as curse words in comic strips. Hardly anything to be proud of. Then the Internet pops up and now he's making a fortune in e-mail addresses and acting like a big shot. You've done pretty well yourself thanks to the dot-com industry. Big deal. It's not like you go around flaunting it.

"Where's your girlfriend *at*?" your brother asks.

"She couldn't make it."

"On your birthday? Some girlfriend," he says rolling his eyes.

"Doesn't look like you're doing much better."

"Au contraire. Here she comes now." Cutting through the crowd is Question Mark. She's dressed in a Papyrus Font and her heels make her look 14 point. "Period, you know Question Mark."

"Sure," you say. You try to appear nonplussed.

"Scotch?" your brother asks.

"A beer if it's not too much trouble," you say bitterly.

Your brother turns his *a* towards the bar and rolls off.

"I can't believe you're with *my brother*," you say.

"Are you jealous?" Question Mark asks.

"No," you lie. "It's just that he's an asshole. That's what his letter stands for. A for asshole."

"Your drink, Madame," your brother says. He hands you a Guinness then drapes his arm around Question Mark. "Come on," he says to her, "I want you to meet my business associate, Backslash."

“I’ll see you in a bit, okay?” Question Mark asks. You watch them walk off together. They’re round and sophisticated and look good together. You feel small in your Times New Roman suit.

By your second drink you’re buzzed. You sneak out the back door to escape the party. Your cousin Asterisk is outside smoking.\*

Your cell phone chimes. Comma has sent you a text. *Happy bday, hows the party, wht ya up 2 aftwds, will cook u some din, had n awsm time last nite, lookn fwd 2 doin it agn . . .* The text goes on but you stop reading. Dinner with Comma sounds nice. You text Comma back. You were going to end the party after another paragraph anyway.

Dinner is excellent. You’re happy Comma is talking. She tells you how she’s sick of people constantly misusing her. “It’s like, lets do a list, oh we’ll use Comma, lets be experimental, oh we’ll use Comma, and it gets really tiring, like, hello, I’m more than just a comma, you know, and—”

“It’s a lot worse being a period.”

“No way, I’d love to be a period, I mean that’s why I like you so much, ‘cause you know how to really say things and mean them, like you don’t try to do too much, like

---

\*Asterisk has always been on the outskirts. He stands outside with his spiked Mohawk and Gothic font. You think about how if he trimmed his hair the two of you wouldn’t look too different.

“I don’t see your girl in there,” you say.

“Footnote? She’s coming. She’s at the library studying.”

“Looking forward to seeing her. You two seem like a good couple.”

“Yeah, we’re cool,” Asterisk says and takes a drag from his cigarette. “We’re different, you know. She’s into annotated literature and postmodern fiction. I’m just on prescription meds.”

“I heard. You should be careful of that.”

“Man, I’m the one who knows the warnings.” He lights another cigarette off the old one.

“I just wonder if it won’t highlight the differences between you.”

“Nah, we’re cool with differences. I don’t think I could stand being together with someone who’s exactly like me. I mean look at the Quotation Marks. All they ever do is listen to other people talk. Hell, they won’t even stand next to each other. Being identical gets boring. You gotta be different from who you’re with or it’s no fun.”

“Yeah,” you say. You’re not sure if you agree. “I’m gonna head back into the main text. We’re about to have cake. You should come in.”

“Thanks, but I’m cool,” Asterisk says, taking a drag, “I’ll gonna wait for Footnote.”

em dashes that just go on and on and try impress you, or just cut you off, and people don't misuse you or—”

“There are always fragments. Incomplete sentences.”

“That's true, but I guess it's really nice to be with someone who can just say what they think, I mean, it's nice to be with you 'cause you finish my sentences for me, and—”

“I feel the same way about you,” you say. You lean across the table and kiss.

That night you listen to the sound of Comma sleeping. Comma's tail is curled over you and you feel cozy. Maybe your cousin Asterisk is right. Maybe you do need someone different. When you and Comma are together it feels like your thinking changes. Comma has mentioned it too; it's as though the two of you together create grammatical choices. Maybe she *is* the one. Oh but there you go again; you're always hoping for closure; these sentences with Comma have just begun; your story together might merely be short fiction; for once try living the sentences together one word at a time without knowing what will come next; there's nothing to lose; if you're unable to live your life without closure you can punctuate and start a new sentence; let yourself relax; see what happens; end of discussion; period.