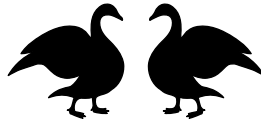


## STEFANIE FREELE

*Editors' Note: We received this story when we were knee-deep in the editing of GPR and were immediately sympathetic to this tortured everyman (and we suspected anyone else who's been faced with the sometimes daunting task of writing [or editing] on a deadline would be as well). We simply couldn't have thought of a better story to introduce this, the inaugural edition of GPR.*

### THE DEADLINE



As he calculated his figures over and over again—once, twice, then three or four times, as many times as he could, inserting numbers here and there, in between, over and around, adding extras, deleting none—his world turned darker as if his vision was lessening, dimming, darkening like night, edging closer like wolves around a wounded animal, until he could see no more, just blackness, utter nothingness, not even the page in front of him or the pencil lead or even the pencil eraser, in fact, not even the pencil itself; he could be writing on the desk for that matter, but he continued to write those numbers, augmenting his spreadsheet, stretching his report, writing, writing, writing until he felt he'd gone mad: mad from lack of sleep, mad from pushing the pencil beyond where it ever went before; and he pushed and pushed until his wife turned on the light and said, *For the love of God, you've got to come to bed.*

And so he did, wearing the same pajamas he had not removed in three days; he lay there blinking until his wife slept the sounds of sleepiness, and he crept toward the chocolate, unwrapping the dark pieces and tucking them into the sides of his mouth with the first one under his tongue like medicine, and then he returned to the desk with the red emergency flashlight spreading its spray of light across his pages.

He hand-wrote with the hurry-zoom of the chocolate, with the rapid beat of his jiggling knee, with half a cheek on the chair and pajamas pinching his middle. Not pinching like he couldn't breathe, but pinching in a way he knew he should unpinch so he would feel better, but that would take time, and he had none of that. He wrote page after page after paragraph after

line after word after word after word until the pencil broke with a down-push, and he reached for another and stuffed two pieces of cracked chocolate in his mouth to ensure he'd meet the target by morning. Not the morning of daylight, but the morning on the East Coast, the morning that came far before his morning, the morning that would be there before his sun would hit the kitchen and glint off the fruit bowl.

The cat jumped across the page, causing the pencil to skid, and he flipped the meow to the side, but she sparked an idea that caused him to circle back to page 73 and edit that section he wasn't really happy with anyway. He underlined and crossed out and zig-zagged across words that were once valuable. A noise behind him interrupted the flow—was it the wife going to the toilet? He gripped the pencil with his go go go hand and flew back to where he was before, only to forget where the thought was taking him, so he bounced the opposite knee for inspiration, ground chocolate between his teeth, and said, *For the love of God, I've got to finish this.*

The flashlight blinked twice, the light turned yellowish, it weakened, it diluted. The figures. The report. The word count. Five hundred words to go. He went back to the beginning and sprinkled adverbs lovingly, quietly, generously, adverbally until he only needed 350. He added *buts* and *therefores* and *thens*. He raced through with liberal adjectives: *magnificent*, *enlarged*, *contentious*. He summarized and quoted and connected and segued as much as he could until the flashlight flickered and petered out, leaving him in the darkness again, not the darkness of an empty heart, but the darkness of an empty wallet.

Finishing the page, with twenty-seven words to go and the clear sound of his wife sneezing from the bedroom, he let himself squeeze out the final sentence, not like a man squashing a full balloon but like a man forcing breath from already emptied lungs. He heaved down the last word, placed it on the paper he couldn't see, adjusted the pinching waistband, and called back the cat. Not the command of *Get over here this very second*, but the command of *By God, I've lost my mind; don't leave me now.*