

# The Crossroads

Written by a  
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This story is a character transformation plot pattern and it contains a contest story subplot of man vs. man.

## Author Interview:

**Question:** What are the most valuable writing tools you have learned?

**Answer:** Learning how to create a motive, focusing on verbs, and being taught about sentence starters has had a huge impact on my writing.

## The Crossroads

William was always bright. Studying with the scholars, and monks since he was a child, he tried to decipher the intricate codes that the teachers poured over. First, they baffled him, but with time, Philosophy, mathematics, Art, History, Latin, and Astrology, all molded into his young life. Other boys led mock battles, battering each other with flimsy swords, while he learned the difference between *anteactus* and *praisenti*. Other boys were drilled on the code of chivalry, while William practised his algebra, and studied Ancient Rome. When the boys strung their bows and loosed their arrows, William stood with nose smudging the window, his thin hands pressed against the glass.

Exactly a year before the Great Fest, William's father, the Duke of Grey Downs, broke in on William and his tutor. He strode in, his feet padding silently on thick carpet. Sighing, the Duke shoved his hands deep into his pockets. William knew this was going to be long. The tutor coughed, and excused himself. Leaning against the rich tapestries, his father silently regarded the shelves of books and instruments, the charts, tables, and long feathery quills. He began, "William?"

He sounded urgent, almost pleading.

"Yes, father?"

Muttering to himself, he began, "Twelve, a bit older than I expected, but you will now begin training as a..." William expected some foreign title to fly from his father's mouth, but instead he heard,

"A page."

All his desires, fears, and destinies, now swirled about him. A page? No more studies...A strange castle...Gruelling exercises...Tournaments and competitions...But worst of all, he would have to face his greatest fear: the boys.

A thousand arguments and objections flew into his mind, he did not dare to dent his father's iron will.

A low moan escaped from somewhere inside him. His father looked embarrassed, but said more.

"Son, I know this may cause you great agony, but you are almost a man. Besides, who will carry on our family name? You know that James is too young and weak to begin training. I want to see my son holding the Golden Lance, courting a fine Lady, and showing his loyalty, strength, and bravery in battle. I know it's in you. You'll just have to search with a fine tooth comb and pick..."

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**SLAM!**

The dummies' hand slapped him across the face, raising an angry welt. Next time it came in for the kill, William ducked, wincing as it whistled over his head.

"Enough!" Their trainer roared, raising his arms in a gesture of silence, and ending the session. The man the boys called "Boar" lumbered towards William, and settled his callused hand on the small shoulder. William's muscles complained, as the man's hand held him in a steely grip. His harsh voice chilled William to the bone.

"Archery...tomorrow...meet before dawn...under portcullis..." The gravely voice faded, as the shadowy hulk clomped away.

Arriving at the gates, next morning, William huddled alone in the dense fog. Beside his ear, a formless voice spoke.

"Will."

The word dropped like a pointed icicle.

Though only a year older than William, the speaker was tall and had filled out into an impressive figure. His voice betrayed his cold prejudice towards his cousin. As he swayed slightly in the

chill wind, he spoke again.

"Why are you here? Your studies are waiting for you. Do you think that you are honestly strong enough to train beside us, who have trained for years? Do you believe you are worthy to serve your king? Book boy?"

William never answered. The mist around him condensed into the forms of other boys.

A fist blew out, and sailed into his gut. William retched across the flagstones. Taunting laughter echoed through the courtyard. Blows buffeted his frame. Hands reaching out to grab hold of his neck were stopped by a voice. Boar was humming a crude song, as he crossed the courtyard. He limped through a puddle, and returned the boys innocent greetings.

William dared not speak, but he knew his bruises, would tell all.

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**Twang!**

The bow sang, as yet another arrow sank into the turf, yards away from William's mark.

Peter, his cousin, laughed and drove an arrow deep into the target. Grimly, William set his arrow in the notch, and prepared to be disappointed. At the last second as William's fingers unleashed the wooden dart, Peter casually nudged his elbow, changing the arrow's course. William was turning to reprimand his cousin, when he heard a thud. The arrow, turning perfectly, charging forward beyond the speed of a galloping horse, had settled in the very center of the linen covered pallet. The central red circle was pierced, and the fletchings had been torn loose. William smiled.

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"Dumb animal."

William was frustrated and embarrassed.

His fat grey pony was not only four hands smaller than the other boys' horses, but stubborn and uncontrollable.

Summoning all his strength, William booted the creature in the sensitive place, between the barrel and shoulder. The pony rose up flailing its hooves, trying to relieve itself of the painful weight on its back.

It succeeded.

William toppled off, tumbling down in a riot of arms and legs.

Only his ego was seriously injured, but his old bruises were renewed. Boar snatched up the reins, and placed them firmly in William's hands, before throwing him back into the saddle.

Laying the whip on the pony's hide, Boar made the animal effectively carry its weight for the rest of the afternoon. After the painful session, William vowed that next time, he would stay on.

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“Grip with your knees, and turn out your heels. Keep a tight hold on the reins, and for Blessed Mercy, *Hang on!*” Boar's voice crescendoed. Last week's detention, from the Duke, for drinking after curfew was fuelling Boar's anger, and he was venting it on Duke's son.

William was anxious to begin, for he craved to learn. His face turned ashen grey, when he saw the golden beast that the stable hand led out.

Towering over him, the beast reeked of impatience. His mane shivered, and his foot crashed in the dust. Keeping a tight hold on the halter, and a sharp eye on the bobbing head, and coal black eyes, the groom explained, how to control him, over jumps, through water, and restrain his fiery spirit.

Cautiously, William remounted his father's hunting steed, christened 'Bucephalus'. Rippling muscles and solid bone shook beneath the boy, as he fought to control the dancing hooves.

The boys looked at the mismatch with disgust, believing that William ruined the portrait perfect specimen. Will did not notice. Boar mounted his own trustworthy steed, an easy-tempered bay, and with a kick of heels, they lunged off, the others lumbering behind them. Peter took up a trot behind Boar, his enormous grey, strong but stupid, holding back the tide of horses.

Bucephalus pranced behind, regal, with nowhere to go.

Finally the coast came into sight, and the horses broke into a canter. Sand replaced moss and roots. They soared.

All, but Bucephalus.

Galloped, is not a word to describe it. Have you ever seen a wave, bitless, and saddleless roar down, and crash, only to be replaced by another and another?

Bucephalus was this wave. He crashed.

He took off in great leaps, like an antelope. His hooves beat a tattoo across the beach. William's heart beat the same rhythm within him. And for a moment, they melded. All memories of a Duke, a page, bruises and sugar lumps faded. But something greater remained. Something mysterious, something unspoken.

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By the time they returned to the group, Bucephalus and William had a strange bond. Perhaps it was William's inexperience, or his kind nature. Or perhaps, Bucephalus had come to a turning point in his attitude; when they ran, their souls briefly touching, he had jumped into a foreign territory, of calm. Now, sharp words, spurs, and the whip were abandoned.

The palomino was quieter, and as they approached the group, he displayed a graceful, calm demeanour. From any other person's point of view, William would have proved a master, in the art of horsemanship.

The rest of the trip was uneventful.

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William was still basking in the light of his new-found relationship, when ill news (at least it was ill news from his vantage point) reached him in the form of a letter:

William,

Boar lately sent me a short note concerning your education. I was very impressed, upon hearing what a natural horseman you are, and that you took an instant liking to My new hunting horse (*this wasn't entirely true*). So, being it the perfect occasion, I would like to offer you, Bucephalus. I wish that I could present him to you in person, but since your training for the tournament must begin before my return from London; I give the right to your trainer.

*Post Scriptum:* I have great pride in my newfound son, and I am glad that you have taken up more manly practices.

Your Father,

*The Duke of GrayDowns*

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The letter was signed with his father's seal and signature. William felt the hot tears rise. His father had never believed in him as a scholar. But, Bucephalus cheered his thoughts. Perhaps, he was destined to become a knight. Letters and symbols still danced in his head. Earning his father's pride would cost him his dream. And his happiness.

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Mounting, William was encouraged by the familiar weight of his lance. Bucephalus nickered, and nudged his knee with affection. William patted him, and whispered encouragement in his ear. Boar broke their conversation by setting the helmet firmly

on William's head.

"Today's the day, boy."

Boar had developed a gruff affection for Will, and secretly supported him. Any past misunderstandings had been forgotten.

William tried to recall the *pas d'armes*.

At the trumpet signal, the opponents ride at each other, carrying only a lance, and a shield, along the right hand side of a wooden dividing barrier.

There are only three lances per knight. When the lances have all been shattered, the knight is finished.

You receive one point for breaking your lance on your opponent's chest.

You receive two points for knocking your opponent off his horse.

When a knight is unhorsed the match is complete.

In the event of an unhorsing, the winner may choose to take the opponent's horse, and armour for his own.

William shivered, staring down the long arm of the lance. He imagined what enormous destruction it could cause. The fact that he could lose Bucephalus chilled the young man to the bone. It was only a squire's match, for the entertainment of the crowd, but William still saw the terrifying resemblance it held to the gladiator's fights of Ancient Rome, that he had studied so long ago.

Under his rigid helm he was as terrified as a hare in a hunt.

He held out his lance, in a mock display of defiance, when Peter appeared on his chestnut charger.

The heralds waving about the banners, with their father's shields, and the trumpets high song, all seemed distant. But suddenly, William was in the moment. Bucephalus devoured ground in huge strides. For a moment, William was paralyzed by fear, but it passed in a wave of anticipation. Time slowed to seconds, and blood pounded in William's ears.

Ka-thud, Ka-thud.

His heart was a drum, keeping beat with Bucephalus' hooves.

Fire ripped across William's torso as Peter's lance made contact with his chest. Bent with the impact, the plate armour bruised, and pinched his shoulder. Bucephalus side stepped with the impact and whinnied nervously, as Boar and the groom ran forward to inspect the damage.

"Only a bruise boy, large, but not bone deep."

The words brought no comfort to William as he twisted in agony. Anger overwhelmed him.

All of this pain, because of his desire to impress his father. How simple minded of him, how...

A deep rumbling whinny echoed in Bucephalus' chanfron.

Courage rose up in William's bones, and he clamped his knees tightly against his partner.

"We toss our lots together."

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Again, the steeds charged forward, separated only by a wooden barrier. Williams won the match this time. He guided a controlled, glancing blow, off of Peter's helmet. Sparks bounced harmlessly off his armour, but the damage was done. The crowd roared, as the boy returned to his groom, sullen and defeated.

Two points.

Peter's charger half reared, as it plunged forward. His lance was steadied, the mask of his helm pulled low. All was ready. Strangely, as Bucephalus, and William tore away from Boar and the groom, William was elsewhere. In his mind a boy, lean and wiry, sat astride a golden horse. They were galloping through a meadow, so intent upon what was ahead, that they did not see a shadow, gliding behind them. Beneath the shadow, flowers wilted, and buffalo grass sagged.

Suddenly it was upon them, devouring. The horse screamed, and rose up, attacking the invisible menace. A stream of blood suddenly appeared across his chest and the boy paled to a ghostly white... The scream was real and so was the blood. Peter had miscalculated. The lance had dipped below its mark at the last second, creating havoc, and confusion. Bucephalus had received the brunt of the blow, and it had pierced the muscles of his chest. He had risen up, higher than the height of the Duke's seat, and then toppled over backward. William was already struggling to his feet from where he had tumbled off, and was rushing to the horse's side.

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William cried that night. If his father had seen the wet streaks, and heard the sobs, there would have been a 'man talk'. But the memories were too fresh. Memories of the armour being stripped off, of the murmur of the crowd, and his feeble cries as Bucephalus was led away.

"We toss our lots together."

The words scorned him.

The die had been cast, and William had come up,  
Alone.

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All of the villages, and the surrounding areas, were humming with expectation. Bards whispered their pieces, and minstrels

quietly strummed their songs. Peasants searched their pantries, and cooks fiddled with their recipes.

The menu was legendary: beef, pork, stuffed pigeons, roasted vegetables, salads, fruits, cheese, breads, chicken broth, onion and leek soup, oyster soup, cakes that resembled castles and boats, songbird pies, boar stomach pastries, wine and beer, turnip and parsnip soup, and a hundred foreign delicacies.

Smells of preparation, lingered in the air. At the strike of eight, the Great Feast would begin.

The entertainment and food would carry on for two days.

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Slowly, William rested the quill, beside his paper. Budding flowers, and whistling birds, swirled in the margins. In his neatest, most intricate script, he had filled the page. It had taken him over four hours to complete it, but he had rejoiced at the opportunity to use the deepest corners of his mind again. He sighed, collected up the papers, and wiped the table clean.

Stepping out, he chose to go through the far outer courtyard, away from the crowds, and those who would remember the past.

His shoes clicked smartly, and the paper fluttered in his hands.

To reach the Hall, he would have to pass through the garden, up to the higher stables, and back past the brook to access the back gate, and avoid the people.

The garden was sparse.

Colder weather had killed all the rosamundis and delphiniums, but herbal scents still wavered.

The higher stable was full of earthy horse smells. Brooms and rakes had been hastily put away, and the feed was quickly divided. William marched on, head down, his hands stiff. But something stopped him. Some sixth sense.

He turned and across the courtyard, he saw a golden head dip over a half door. The horse was silent.

Quickly, dispersing his emotions, he strode towards his destination. Bucephalus watched his only friend fade into the descending fog. His eyes softened, and his lips fluttered in a sigh. Heaving a breath, his head sank to the floor.

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The Bard cleared his throat, shuffled his papers, and began a long, mournful ballad. The guests settled down, with delicacy filled stomachs, and beer and wine still thick on their tongues.

The tale followed the love of an elf legend and a mortal maiden. It was typical, with them being forever separated, and it mostly contained romantic, departing words of woe. The Duke yawned, and began to gnaw on a mutton leg. William hoped their might suddenly be an adventurous turn in the story. Perhaps enemies would slaughter the maiden, and the elf would set out on a daring quest to seek revenge. Or maybe, it would end soon. Neither of these came true.

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William's was a riddle.

It was not difficult, but he knew only one person would understand it. That was his intention. His was the last piece to be recited, so he had to suffer through every performance given that night. The guests only stayed, because of the abundant amount of foods and drink. The ballads, and legends held no interest to them. By the time the podium was his, men were snoring loudly and children had begun a game of hide and seek, under the enormous oak table.

He had not expected any eager listeners, but he had hoped for at least a meagre audience.

When he began, he did not pause, he did not wait for the noise to settle. He startled the people into listening. And soon they were eager for more.

I am here.  
I am a body, a soul, a mind.  
Every woman holds me tight.  
I can be brave, I can be gallant.  
I can be timid, I can be afraid.  
I can be your servant,  
And I can be your equal.  
You are the fingers of the potter.  
I am the shapeless lump of clay.  
I can become what you mold me,  
Or I can become what I was meant to be.  
I can pour you a glass of wine,  
Or I can smash the goblet in my fist.  
I can be the lap of wisdom,  
And the mouth of stupidity.  
You can put me under lock and key.  
But I will break free.  
You can give me a law.  
I can observe it.  
I can object it.  
I can contradict it.  
I can do you a favour.  
I do not expect it to be returned.  
I can honour you,  
I can love you.  
But I can hate you.  
I am a lamb, young and innocent.  
But I will become the ram.  
You can steal from me.  
You can destroy me.  
I am your will.  
But I have my own will.

I can be rebellious.  
I can be a gift.  
I can be a curse.  
You guide my every step.  
I change every direction.  
And then at the fork.  
I become independent.  
At the crossroads, I am no longer all this.  
Who am I?

Before William had even stepped off the podium, the revered hush was broken.

The Duke of GrayDowns bellowed “A Son!”  
Men woke, and children cringed.

William’s father walked silently towards the stand, a falter in his step, and a tremble on his lip.  
The large hands came to rest on William’s shoulders.  
His voice cracked, and a lone tear glistened on the wrinkled cheek.  
“My son.”