

CHARACTER FLAWS!!!

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CHARACTERS:

MARCUS COOPER, 35, African-American novelist struggling with writer's block

ELENA RODRIGUEZ, 28, Latina detective from Marcus's crime series

KWAME ASANTE, 45, African protagonist from Marcus's historical fiction

PRIYA SHARMA, 22, Indian-American college student from Marcus's coming-of-age novel

THE CRITIC (VOICE ONLY), representing Marcus's inner doubts

SETTING:

Marcus's cluttered home office. A desk covered with newspapers, books, empty coffee cups, and a laptop with a blinking cursor. Bookshelves line the walls. A window shows the city lights outside.

TIME: 3AM

SYNOPSIS: Marcus is a professional writer going through a severe writer's block. He tries everything to get the juices flowing but no go. Then he is visited by three of his characters that he created. Each character has come to convince Marcus to pick up their story and it will break his writer's block. First, not sure how to take this surprise he panics and has to be calmed down. After a while with his characters they help him break his writer's block.

ACT I

SCENE 1

(MARCUS sits hunched over his laptop, staring at a blank document. He types a few words, deletes them, then slams his hands on the desk in frustration.)

MARCUS:

Three months. Three goddamn months and nothing. Not a single decent sentence.

(He stands and paces around the room, running his hands through his dreads.)

MARCUS:

Come on, Marcus. You've written four novels. You know how to do this. Just... write something. Anything.

(He sits back down and begins typing frantically, then stops and reads what he's written.)

MARCUS:

"The man walked down the street. He was sad."

(He deletes everything and puts his head in his hands.)

MARCUS:

This is pathetic. My editor's going to drop me. My agent already thinks I'm washed up. Maybe I should just quit and become a barista or something.

(He picks up a framed photo from his desk - him at a book signing, smiling.)

MARCUS:

Look at that guy. So confident. So sure he had something to say. What happened to him?

(He sets the photo down and walks to the window.)

MARCUS:

All those people out there, sleeping peacefully. They don't know what it's like to have your entire identity wrapped up in something you can't do anymore. They don't know what it's like to feel like a fraud.

*(Suddenly, the room grows dim except for a spotlight on **MARCUS**. **ELENA RODRIGUEZ** steps out from behind the bookshelf, adjusting her leather jacket.)*

ELENA:

You know, for a guy who created me, you sure are a quitter.

*(**MARCUS** looks up, startled, then rubs his eyes.)*

MARCUS:

I'm hallucinating. Great. Now I'm losing my mind on top of everything else. Way to go, Marcus. What's next... talking animals?

ELENA:

You're not crazy, Marcus. Well, maybe a little, but all writers are. I'm Elena Rodriguez, Detective First Class, LAPD. Ring any bells?

MARCUS:

This isn't possible. You're... you're just a character. I made you up.

ELENA:

Made me up? *(laughs)* Honey, you gave me life. There's a difference. And right now, that life is stuck in limbo because you can't figure out how to finish my story.

MARCUS:

Elena... but you're not real.

ELENA:

Real? I've got thoughts, feelings, a badge number, and a really complicated relationship with Detective Martinez that you left hanging in chapter twelve. How much more real do you need?

(She walks around the office, examining the books on the shelves.)

ELENA:

"Blood on Sunset Boulevard," "The Hollywood Murders," "Death in Little Tokyo." These aren't just titles, Marcus. These are my cases. My life. My sleepless nights and my victories.

MARCUS:

I know, but—

ELENA:

But nothing. You created a world where I matter. Where I solve crimes and save people and fight for justice. And then you just... stopped. Like I don't exist anymore.

(KWAME ASANTE emerges from the shadows, wearing traditional Ghanaian Kente cloth.)

KWAME:

She speaks the truth, my friend. We are all trapped in your mind, waiting for resolution.

MARCUS:

Kwame? But you're from my historical novel about the Gold Coast. That book was published two years ago.

KWAME:

Published, yes. But completed? I think not. You left questions unanswered about my journey to America. My story feels... unfinished.

(He moves with dignity across the room, his presence commanding attention.)

KWAME:

I carried the wisdom of my ancestors across an ocean. I survived the middle passage, the plantations, the promise of freedom. But you never told them what happened next. What did I build with my freedom, Marcus? What legacy did I leave?

MARCUS:

I... I thought your story was complete.

KWAME:

A man's story is never complete until he has passed his wisdom to the next generation. You wrote my struggle, but not my triumph. You wrote my pain, but not my healing.

(PRIYA SHARMA appears, sitting cross-legged on the desk, wearing jeans and a Columbia University sweatshirt.)

PRIYA:

And don't even get me started on my situation. You had me halfway through my sophomore year, dealing with my parents' expectations and my own dreams, and then... nothing. Radio silence for eight months.

MARCUS:

Priya...

PRIYA:

I was supposed to declare my major, remember? Computer science like my parents wanted, or journalism like I dreamed. I was supposed to have that conversation with my mom about arranged marriage. I was supposed to figure out if I could love Raj the way he loves me.

(She jumps down from the desk and faces him directly.)

PRIYA:

Do you know what it's like to be frozen in time? To be stuck in the middle of the most important decisions of your life?

ELENA:

Okay, sob stories aside, I got here first. Marcus needs to work on my next case.

KWAME:

My friend, I have been waiting longer than both of you. My story deserves its proper conclusion.

PRIYA:

Are you kidding me? I'm literally in the middle of a panic attack in chapter fifteen! I need resolution!

MARCUS:

Stop! All of you, just... stop.

(He sits heavily in his chair, overwhelmed.)

MARCUS:

This is insane. You're all figments of my imagination. I'm having a breakdown.

ELENA:

Look, Marcus, we can stand here all night debating the nature of reality, or we can help you figure out why you're stuck. What do you think is more productive?

(The lighting shifts slightly. The three characters settle into different parts of the office, making themselves at home.)

PRIYA:

So, when did this whole writer's block thing start?

MARCUS:

I don't know exactly. It was gradual. First, the words came slower. Then I'd sit for hours without writing anything. Then days. Now...

ELENA:

Now it's been three months. What happened three months ago?

MARCUS:

The reviews came out for "Death in Little Tokyo."

KWAME:

Ah. The critics.

MARCUS:

They weren't just bad. They were... personal. Vicious.

(He rummages through papers on his desk and pulls out several printed reviews.)

MARCUS:

Listen to this: "Cooper's latest effort is a tone-deaf appropriation of cultures he clearly doesn't understand."

ELENA:

Appropriation? Are you serious? You spent six months researching LAPD procedures and talking to Latino officers!

MARCUS:

Here's another: "Marcus Cooper is a one-trick pony masquerading as a serious novelist. His characters are cardboard cutouts with no real depth or authenticity."

ELENA:

Cardboard cutouts? I have seventeen commendations, a complicated relationship with my ex-husband, and I've been seeing a therapist about my trust issues since book two!

KWAME:

Critics are like storm clouds, Marcus. They pass over, they make noise, but they do not change the fundamental nature of the earth beneath.

PRIYA:

Plus, weren't there good reviews too? I remember you celebrating when that one in the Times called your character development "nuanced and authentic."

MARCUS:

Yeah... there were good ones. But the bad ones just... stuck.

ELENA:

Why?

MARCUS:

Because what if they're right? What if I am just appropriating? What if I have no business writing characters whose experiences I haven't lived?

(A long pause. The characters exchange glances.)

KWAME:

Marcus, when you wrote my story, what did you think about?

MARCUS:

I thought about my grandfather's stories. About resilience and hope in the face of impossible odds. About what it means to leave everything you know for the promise of something better.

ELENA:

And when you wrote me?

MARCUS:

I thought about justice. About fighting for people who can't fight for themselves. About being strong in a world that tries to make you small.

PRIYA:

And me?

MARCUS:

About the pressure to be perfect. About finding your own voice when everyone else is telling you who you should be. About the courage it takes to disappoint people you love in order to be true to yourself.

PRIYA:

Those don't sound like stereotypes to me. They sound like universal human experiences.

ELENA:

Marcus, you know what the difference is between a writer who cares and one who doesn't?

MARCUS:

What?

ELENA:

The one who cares asks these questions. The one who doesn't never even thinks about it.

KWAME:

You have spent time with people like us. You have listened to our stories, our struggles, our joys. You have approached us with respect and curiosity, not assumption.

PRIYA:

And when you get something wrong, which you will because you're human, you learn from it and do better next time. That's how growth works.

MARCUS:

But what if I hurt someone? What if my words cause pain instead of connection?

ELENA:

Then you apologize and you do better. But Marcus, what if your words help someone? What if they make someone feel seen, understood, less alone?

KWAME:

I have received letters, Marcus. Through you, readers have reached out to say that my story helped them understand their own family histories, their own struggles with identity and belonging.

PRIYA:

Same here. A girl from Ohio wrote to say that reading about my college struggles helped her have a difficult conversation with her parents about her major.

ELENA:

And how many women have told you that seeing a strong Latina detective made them feel represented, made them believe they could be strong too?

(MARCUS looks at them, considering.)

MARCUS:

I remember those letters...

PRIYA:

Then why are you letting the critics drown out the readers?

MARCUS:

Because... because the critics have platforms. They have authority. They can end careers.

ELENA:

Or they can make you stronger. Look, in my line of work, there's always someone telling you you're doing it wrong. You're too soft, you're too hard, you care too much, you don't care enough. But at the end of the day, you have to trust your instincts.

KWAME:

The ancestors had a saying: "The wind may bend the tree, but it cannot uproot one with deep roots."

MARCUS:

What are my roots?

KWAME:

Your love of story. Your desire to understand the human experience in all its complexity. Your belief that everyone deserves to be seen and heard.

*(The lighting shifts to a warmer tone. **MARCUS** stands and begins pacing again, but this time with more energy.)*

MARCUS:

I used to love writing. It felt like... like I was discovering something new about the world every time I sat down.

PRIYA:

What changed?

MARCUS:

The stakes got higher. People were paying attention. There were expectations. Sales figures. Awards to win or lose. Reviews to worry about.

ELENA:

So you stopped writing for yourself and started writing for them.

MARCUS:

I guess... yeah.

KWAME:

Who is "them"?

MARCUS:

Critics. Editors. Readers. The literary establishment. Everyone who has an opinion about what I should or shouldn't write.

PRIYA:

That's a lot of people to try to please. No wonder you're blocked.

ELENA:

Marcus, when you started writing, who were you writing for?

MARCUS:

(thinking) Myself, I guess. And... my mom. She used to tell me stories when I was little. Amazing stories about her grandmother, about our family history. I wanted to tell stories that would make her proud.

KWAME:

And does she read your books?

MARCUS:

She's read all of them. Multiple times. She keeps copies on her coffee table and gives them to everyone who comes over.

PRIYA:

Sounds like someone who's already proud.

(THE CRITIC's voice suddenly fills the room, cold and authoritative.)

THE CRITIC (V.O.):

But what about artistic integrity? What about cultural sensitivity? What about the responsibility that comes with having a platform?

(The characters tense up.)

ELENA:

Who was that?

MARCUS:

(sighing) That's the voice in my head. The one that tells me everything I write is wrong.

THE CRITIC (V.O.):

Because it might be wrong. Every word you write could be misinterpreted, could offend, could reveal your ignorance.

KWAME:

And so you would write nothing? You would let fear silence you completely?

THE CRITIC (V.O.):

Better to be silent than to be problematic.

PRIYA:

That's bullshit. Sorry, but it is. Silence isn't neutral. Silence is choosing not to participate in the conversation.

ELENA:

And conversations are how we learn. How we grow. How we connect.

THE CRITIC (V.O.):

But what if you get it wrong?

MARCUS:

(standing up, addressing the voice directly) Then I get it wrong. And I learn from it. And I do better next time.

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HE CRITIC (V.O.):

That's easy to say—

MARCUS:

No, it's not easy! None of this is easy! Writing has never been easy! But I'd rather try and fail than not try at all!

*(The room falls silent. The characters look at **MARCUS** with something like pride.)*

ELENA:

There he is.

KWAME:

The writer we know and love.

PRIYA:

The one who isn't afraid to take risks.

MARCUS:

I am afraid. I'm terrified. But maybe... maybe that's okay. Okay, so I'm going to try writing again. But I need your help.

ELENA:

What kind of help?

MARCUS:

I need to understand you better. All of you. I need to know what I got right and what I got wrong.

PRIYA:

Oh, this should be good.

KWAME:

A brave choice, my friend.

MARCUS:

Elena, let's start with you. What did I miss about your character?

ELENA:

(settling into a chair) Well, for starters, you never really explored my relationship with my family. You mentioned that I have three brothers, but they never appear in the stories.

MARCUS:

I didn't think they were relevant to the cases.

ELENA:

Everything is relevant, Marcus. My oldest brother Miguel thinks I'm trying to be too white by becoming a cop. My youngest brother thinks I'm a traitor to the community. My middle brother is the only one who gets it, but he's deployed overseas, so we only talk on video calls.

MARCUS:

(typing notes) That's... that actually explains a lot about your character. The way you sometimes second-guess yourself.

ELENA:

Exactly. I'm not just fighting crime. I'm fighting the voice in my head that sounds like Miguel, telling me I don't belong. And I'm fighting the voice that sounds like every victim's family member who looks at me and sees someone who might understand their pain.

KWAME:

This is good. This is the depth that was missing.

PRIYA:

My turn! Marcus, you got some things right about the Indian-American experience, but you missed some big stuff too.

MARCUS:

Like what?

PRIYA:

Like the fact that my struggle isn't just about choosing between my parents' dreams and my own. It's about feeling like I'm not Indian enough for the Indian kids or American enough for the American kids.

MARCUS:

I touched on that...

PRIYA:

You touched on it, but you didn't dive in. Do you know what it's like to have your authenticity questioned by everyone? The Indian kids at school think I'm too westernized. The white kids

think I'm too traditional. I exist in this weird in-between space where I have to prove myself to everyone.

MARCUS:

(typing) God, I really simplified that, didn't I?

PRIYA:

A little, yeah. And another thing - you made my parents very one-dimensional. Strict immigrants who only care about grades and career success. But my mom was a poet before she came to America. She gave up her dreams so I could have mine.

MARCUS:

I never wrote that.

PRIYA:

Because you never asked. You saw "Indian parents" and wrote what you thought you knew instead of digging deeper.

KWAME:

Now it is my turn. Marcus, you captured the pain of my journey, the horror of displacement. But you focused so much on the suffering that you forgot about the joy.

MARCUS:

Joy?

KWAME:

Yes, joy. We celebrated, even in chains. We sang, even in sorrow. We found ways to honor our ancestors, to pass down our stories, to maintain our humanity even when others tried to strip it away.

MARCUS:

I thought I was being respectful by focusing on the injustice...

KWAME:

Injustice is part of the story, but it is not the whole story. We were not just victims, Marcus. We were survivors, creators, lovers, dreamers. We built communities. We raised families. We made beauty out of ashes.

MARCUS:

(stopping typing, looking overwhelmed) Jesus. I really don't know what I'm doing, do I?

ELENA:

Hey, none of us know what we're doing. That's what makes it interesting.

PRIYA:

The fact that you're asking these questions, that you want to do better - that matters.

KWAME:

And Marcus, you did get many things right. Your instincts are good. Your heart is in the right place. You just need to trust yourself to go deeper.

MARCUS:

Okay, but here's what I don't understand. If I got so much wrong, why do I have readers who connect with these characters?

ELENA:

Because even imperfect representation can be meaningful. I may not be a perfect Latina detective, but I'm better than no Latina detective at all.

PRIYA:

And people don't need characters to be perfect. They need them to be human.

KWAME:

The human experience transcends the specifics of culture and identity. Love, fear, hope, loss - these are universal. When you write from the heart, people feel it.

MARCUS:

But how do I balance that with getting the details right?

ELENA:

Research. Talk to people. Ask questions. And when people correct you, listen.

PRIYA:

And don't be afraid to admit what you don't know. Some of my favorite authors include acknowledgments where they thank their sensitivity readers and admit their limitations.

KWAME:

Humility is a strength, not a weakness.

MARCUS:

Sensitivity readers... I never thought of that.

ELENA:

Because you were trying to do it all yourself. But writing doesn't have to be a solitary act.

PRIYA:

Collaborate. Build relationships. Make your writing process inclusive from the beginning, not just at the end.

MARCUS:

(typing) This is good. This is really good. I feel like I'm understanding something important here.

(THE CRITIC (V.O.) returns, but quieter now.)

THE CRITIC (V.O.):

But what if they're just being nice? What if you're still not good enough?

MARCUS:

(pausing) There it is again.

ELENA:

The critic voice?

MARCUS:

Yeah. It never really goes away, does it?

KWAME:

No, but it doesn't have to control you.

PRIYA:

Think of it like a really annoying roommate. You can't kick them out, but you don't have to do everything they say.

ELENA:

In police work, we call it "tactical breathing." When you're in a high-stress situation, you acknowledge the fear, but you don't let it paralyze you.

MARCUS:

How?

ELENA:

You breathe. You focus on what you can control. And you take the next right action.

THE CRITIC (V.O.):

But what is the next right action?

MARCUS:

(standing up, pacing) The next right action is... to write. To write imperfectly, but with intention. To write with humility, but not paralysis.

KWAME:

Yes.

PRIYA:

And to keep learning. To keep growing.

ELENA:

And to trust that your readers are smart enough to engage with complex, flawed characters.

MARCUS:

You know what? I think I want to try something different.

ALL THREE:

What?

MARCUS:

What if my next book isn't about any of you? What if it's about... this? About a writer who loses his way and has to find it again with the help of his characters?

PRIYA:

Meta. I like it.

ELENA:

It's risky.

KWAME:

The best stories often are.

MARCUS:

It feels too personal. Too vulnerable.

ELENA:

Marcus, vulnerability isn't weakness. It's courage.

PRIYA:

And some of the most powerful stories are the most personal ones.

KWAME:

When you write from your truth, others recognize their own truth in your words.

MARCUS:

But what if people think it's self-indulgent?

THE CRITIC (V.O.):

They will. They'll say you're navel-gazing, that you're making everything about yourself.

ELENA:

Some people will say that. Some people say that about every book.

PRIYA:

But other people will connect with it. Other people will see their own creative struggles reflected in yours.

KWAME:

And that connection is what makes art worthwhile.

(MARCUS sits at his computer and begins typing with more confidence than before.)

MARCUS:

(reading aloud as he writes) "The cursor blinked at him mockingly, a digital heartbeat counting down to his creative death."

ELENA:

Oh, that's good.

MARCUS:

"He had forgotten what it felt like to trust his own voice, to believe that his words mattered to anyone besides himself."

PRIYA:

Keep going.

MARCUS:

"The reviews had been like poison, seeping into his confidence until he questioned every word, every character, every story he'd ever told."

KWAME:

Yes. The specificity makes it universal.

MARCUS continues writing, the stage begins to transform around him. The cluttered office becomes more organized, the lighting warmer.)

MARCUS:

"But then his characters began to speak back to him, not as creations but as collaborators, not as subjects but as teachers."

ELENA:

Are you writing about us?

MARCUS:

I'm writing about all of us. The relationship between writer and character, between creator and creation.

PRIYA:

I love that we're not just your puppets in this story. We have agency.

KWAME:

We are partners in the creative process.

MARCUS:

(still typing) "He realized that he had been writing in fear - fear of criticism, fear of failure, fear of causing harm. But his characters reminded him that the greater fear should be of silence, of stories left untold, of connections unmade."

THE CRITIC (V.O.):

(fading) But what if...

MARCUS:

(interrupting) What if I succeed? What if I write something meaningful? What if I help someone feel less alone?

(The critic's voice disappears entirely.)

ELENA:

I think you just sent your inner critic packing.

MARCUS:

For now. I'm sure it'll be back.

PRIYA:

But now you know how to handle it.

KWAME:

You acknowledge its concerns, but you do not let it stop you from creating.

*(As **MARCUS** continues writing, the three characters begin to fade slightly, but they're smiling.)*

ELENA:

We're going to leave you to it now, Marcus.

MARCUS:

(looking up) Wait, don't go. What if I get stuck again?

KWAME:

We are always here, in your imagination, in your heart. But the words must come from you.

PRIYA:

Remember, you're not writing for the critics or the publishers or even the readers. You're writing because you have to. Because the stories demand to be told.

ELENA:

And Marcus? Stop being so hard on yourself. You're a good writer. More importantly, you're a good person trying to tell good stories. That's enough.

MARCUS:

Will I see you again? In other stories?

ELENA:

That depends. Do you have more cases for me to solve?

PRIYA:

Do you want to see what happens when I finally talk to my parents?

KWAME:

Do you want to learn what I built with my freedom?

MARCUS:

(smiling) Yeah. I do. But first, I need to finish this story. Our story.

*(The three characters nod and begin to fade completely. **MARCUS** is alone again, but the room feels different now - warmer, more alive.)*

MARCUS:

(typing with growing enthusiasm) "The writer realized that his characters had never really left him. They had been waiting patiently for him to remember that stories aren't written in isolation - they're discovered in collaboration, in conversation, in the space between what we know and what we're learning."

(He pauses, then continues typing faster.)

MARCUS:

"He began to write, not because he had conquered his fear, but because he had made peace with it. He wrote knowing he would make mistakes, knowing he would face criticism, knowing that perfection was not the goal."

(The sound of keys clicking rhythmically fills the silence.)

MARCUS:

(continuing to type) "He wrote because silence was not an option. Because in the space between fear and hope, between questions and answers, between the blank page and the filled one, there were stories waiting to be born. Stories that might matter to someone, somewhere, somewhen."

(He stops typing and looks at the screen, then smiles.)

MARCUS:

"And that was enough."

(He stretches, looks at the clock - it's now 6 AM, and sunlight is beginning to filter through the window.)

MARCUS:

(to himself) That's enough for tonight. But I'll be back tomorrow. And the day after that. And the day after that.

(He saves the document, closes the laptop, and stands. As he moves to leave, he pauses and looks back at the desk.)

MARCUS:

Thank you. All of you.

(He turns off the lights and exits. The stage remains lit by the morning sunlight streaming through the window, highlighting the laptop where his story waits.)

(Fade to black.)

END OF PLAY