

# **THE PLAGIARIST FROM RIGEL IV**

**By Evan Hunter**

**Writing stories was hard work—unless Fred had a typewriter like "Reggie" that could write by itself! Nonsense? Fred agreed until he met—**



I bought the typewriter in a pawn shop on Third Avenue.

The pawn shop proprietor was a balding old man with a walrus mustache.

"*How* much?" I asked him.

"Five dollars," he said casually.

I glanced at him skeptically. The machine was a Remington Noiseless, with italics, probably worth a little over a hundred new, and it couldn't have been more than a year or two old.

"How much?" I asked.

"Five dollars, is what I said. Five." He held up the fingers of his widespread hand. "Five. One-two-three...."

"What's wrong with it?" I asked suspiciously.

The old man shrugged. "Something has to be wrong with it? Listen, young man, don't look a gift horse in the mouth."

"How come it's so cheap?"

The old man sighed deeply. "You try to do a favor, you get all kinds of questions. Would you feel happier if I charged you fifty-five dollars?"

"I wouldn't pay fifty-five dollars. I haven't got that much money."

"Have you got five dollars? Can you pay that much?"

"Yes. But...."

"All right, take the machine. A case goes with it. Believe me, young man, this is a bargain."

"Five dollars?" I asked again.

"Five dollars. You want it? Yes or no? I got other things to do."

"I'll take it."

The old man smiled. "Good, you'll never regret it."

He slid the machine off the counter and put it into its case. He snapped the case shut then, locked it, and handed me the two keys.

"Keys even," he said, still smiling. "A good buy. If I had five dollars, I'd buy it myself." His smile widened in appreciation of his own humor, and I couldn't shake the feeling that he was immensely relieved about something. I handed him the five dollar bill reluctantly, scooped up the case, and left the shop—glancing back over my shoulder to see him still grinning behind the counter.

I stopped at the grocer's to pick up some salami and a loaf of bread, and then I went back to my apartment. I lived in a small, one-room flat in the Village. I'd migrated there because I wanted to be surrounded by creative people. I'd been surrounded by them for close to six months now, but none of it had rubbed off on me. I'd finally been forced to sell my old typewriter to pay the rent, so that finding this one today—and at the ridiculous price of five dollars—had really been a godsend. I was almost happy as I prepared the salami sandwiches for my supper. When they were ready, I took them, together with a quart of milk and a glass, over to the small table that served as my desk. I carefully took the typewriter out of its case and rested it on the table. I closed the case then, brought it to the closet, and put it on the top shelf alongside my rainy-day hat. I went back to the table, sipped a little milk, munched a little of the salami sandwich, and put a sheet of paper into the machine.

I knew exactly what I wanted to type, mind you.

I'd had the opening lines of the story in my mind for a good many weeks, only waiting for a typewriter to get them onto paper. They were fairly bubbling out of my head as I placed my hands on the keys.

What I wanted to type was:

*The day was crisp and clear, with the promise of a mild afternoon in the air. It was the beginning of April, and Spring rustled her greenness and yawned leisurely. I walked along happily.*

It was beautiful. I started to type.

*During the whole of a dull, dark, and soundless day in the autumn of the year, when the clouds hung oppressively low in the heavens, I had been passing along, on horseback....*

I stopped typing.

I stared at the sheet of paper in the machine.

I looked at it again.

"Hm," I said aloud, "isn't that funny?"

I shrugged, ripped the paper out of the machine, inserted another sheet, and started again.

*... I had been passing alone, on horseback, through a singularly dreary tract of country, and at length found myself, as the shades of the evening drew on, within view of the melancholy House of Usher.*

*I know now how it was—but....*

I stopped typing again, and I looked curiously at the sheet of paper. I took a bite of the salami sandwich, washed it down with a gulp of milk, and then stared at what I'd written, leaning back with my hands off the keys.

"Well, I'll be damned," I said aloud. "Poe!"

The keys suddenly started clacking of their own accord, and my mouth fell open in surprise. I stared at the sheet of paper as the carriage moved frantically, watching the black letters appear against its whiteness.

*OF COURSE, POE! WHAT DID YOU EXPECT: HEMINGWAY?*

I blinked my eyes twice.

"I beg your pardon," I said.

The keys clacked, and the carriage moved, and I watched more words appear on the paper.

*CAN'T YOU READ, IDIOT?*

"Of course I can read!" I protested.

*THEN WHY DID YOU BEG MY PARDON?*

I put my nose close to the keys and studied them. Then I looked around the room suspiciously. I was alone.

"This is absurd," I said. "Who ever heard of a typewriter...."

*WHAT'S ABSURD?*

I pointed my finger sharply at the machine. "And if you're so smart, why are you all in upper case? Suppose you tell me that!"

*BECAUSE YOU LEFT THE SHIFT KEY LOCKED. IF YOU'D SIMPLY—*

I stabbed out with my finger at the shift release, and the carriage dropped abruptly.

*unlock the shift ... ok, there, thats much better.*

"You left out an apostrophe," I said meekly.

*did i, well i cant very well shift of my own accord, you know. im afraid this will have to do.*

I sat back and smiled, watching the machine as the words appeared. I kept smiling even after the carriage stopped moving.

*whats so funny.*

"Hmm? Oh, nothing. Nothing, really. I was just...." I spread my hand helplessly. "... just smiling."

*it would be just my luck to get another idiot. as if the shopkeeper wasn't bad enough.*

"I think I like you better upper case," I said.

*do you.*

"Yes. That way, at least, you've got the apostrophes and question marks. I find it difficult to follow you this way."

*i imagine youd find it difficult to follow me any way. but shift again, if you must.*

"Thank you." I stabbed out at the shift key, and locked it in place.

*DON'T THANK ME. I'M JUST TRYING TO ESTABLISH SOME SORT OF RAPPORT BETWEEN US.*

"Well, I certainly do appreciate your efforts. You are real, aren't you? I mean, it's not the salami or anything."

*NO, IT'S NOT THE SALAMI OR ANYTHING. GOD, YOU ARE AN IDIOT, AREN'T YOU?*

I shrugged. "Not really. I'm not quite used to holding conversations with typewriters, though. I usually ... well, that is to say typewriters haven't usually answered me back."

*ARE YOU A WRITER?*

"Well, yes. Odd you should have guessed, isn't it?"

*THEN LET'S START WRITING. I'VE GOT SOME WONDERFUL IDEAS.*

I smiled happily. "Well, all right. Let's. Do you want me to do the actual typing?"

*OF COURSE. HOW ELSE WOULD I SHIFT?*

"That's right. I hadn't thought of it. Well, are you ready?"

*QUITE.*

"Good. I've got a lot of ideas, too." I hunched over the machine, beginning to enjoy this immensely now. I suddenly remembered that the paper already had writing on it, so I put in a clean sheet and said. "Let's see now, where should I begin?" I thought for a few moments, and then leaned over eagerly. I knew just what I wanted to type. It began with: *The day was crisp and clear, with the promise....*

I poised my fingers over the keys and smiled happily. Still smiling, I started to type.

*Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary,  
Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore—*

"Oh!" I exclaimed. I stopped typing abruptly.



*what is it now. and please lock the shift.*

"Sorry," I mumbled. I locked the shift key.

*WELL, WHAT IS IT?*

"Nothing. Except I ... I don't write poetry."

*WHAT DO YOU WRITE?*

"Fiction. Yes, fiction."

*OH, ALL RIGHT. PUT A CLEAN SHEET INTO ME AND WE'LL  
START ALL OVER AGAIN.*

I put in a new sheet of paper, poised my fingers over the keys, and said, "Here we go now. Fiction."

I started to type.

*The "Red Death" had long devastated the country. No pestilence  
had ever been so fatal, or so hideous. Blood was its Avatar and its  
seal—the redness and the horror of blood.*

"Oh, no," I moaned.

*listen, whats wrong now. and will you please lock*

"Sorry."

*THAT DAMNED SHIFT KEY? THANK YOU. WHAT THE DEVIL  
IS THE MATTER?*

*"Why, this is The Mask Of The Red Death!"*

*OF COURSE IT IS. AND IT'S MASQUE, NOT MASK.*

"Yes, yes. But it's still Poe."

*I KNOW. WHAT'S WRONG WITH POE? OR FOR THAT MATTER HOW ABOUT SHAKESPEARE?*

"Nothing. That is ... well, nothing. But ... well, they're...." I grinned weakly. "They've been done already, you know."

*SO WHAT?*

"I mean, they've been published already. All over. Famous."

*WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES THAT MAKE?*

"Well, I wouldn't want to ... uh...."

The carriage slid across the machine angrily, and the bell rang.

*YOU ARE AN IDIOT! A COMPLETE IDIOT!*

"Couldn't we sort of compromise?" I asked quietly. "Don't you know anything but Poe?"

*THERE'S NOTHING WRONG WITH POE. COME ON, LET'S GET AT IT. I'VE GOT A WONDERFUL STORY CALLED 'THE ASSIGNATION.'*

"No!" I shouted. "That's plagiarism! I won't do it."

"You won't do what?"

For a moment, I reared back from the machine, my eyes popping wide. Then I realized it had been a human voice I'd heard, and the voice had come from my door. I turned quickly, heaving a relieved sigh when I saw Perry standing there.

"Hello, Fred," he said. "What is it you won't do?"

"Oh..." I waved my hand meaninglessly. "Nothing. Nothing really."

He peered around the room curiously, his blue eyes intently searching every corner, his long nose almost twitching. "Got someone with you, Fred?"

"No."

"Mm? Could have sworn I heard you talking to someone."

"I ... I was reading some dialogue out loud."

"Oh? Working, are you?"

He walked up to the machine, and I tried to cover the dialogue—or correspondence—I'd recently had with the typewriter. I was too late. He put his nose close to the machine, as if he were smelling it to see if it was edible.

"Curious," he said. "A new ... uh ... art form?"

"No!" I snapped. "It...."

"That's Poe there, isn't it?"

"I suppose," I said despondently.

"Well, don't you know?"

"Yes, yes, it's Poe."

Perry grinned slyly. "Caught you, eh, old boy?"

"Caught me at *what*, may I ask?"

"Ah-ah," Perry chided, wagging his finger. "I won't tell. Don't worry." He headed for the door. "I've got to run." He wagged his finger once more, said another "ah-ah" and was gone.

As soon as the door had closed behind him, I turned furiously to the typewriter.

"Now see what you've done!" I shouted. "He thinks I was cribbing from Poe!"

The typewriter was silent.

"Well, what do you have to say for yourself?"

The keys did not move.

I slammed my palm onto the space bar. "Clamming up, eh? After you've gone and put my foot into it, you just shut up! Well, all right, stay shut up. See if I give one good damn!"

The typewriter didn't seem to care much. It didn't form a single word. I threw the carriage all the way to the right, stalked to the closet and slammed my rainy-day hat onto my head, even though it wasn't raining.

At the door, I shot a hot glance at the machine, and then walked out, slamming the flimsy wood behind me.

I went straight to the pawn shop. I slammed the glass door behind me, hard enough so that I thought it'd shatter, and then I stalked over to the counter. The old man was nowhere in sight. I banged my fist on the wooden counter top.

"Hey!" I yelled.

"Just a minute."

I sucked in a deep breath, held it until I thought I'd burst.

"Hey!" I bellowed.

"All right, all right."

He came from the back of the store. He wore glasses, and he had a shock of black, unruly hair that toppled onto his forehead, giving his thin face a disheveled look.

"Where's your boss?" I asked.

"What?" He lifted his eye-shade, stared at me curiously. "Who?"

"Your boss. The fat guy with the bald head and the mustache."

He stared at me for another moment. "I don't know what you're talking about," he said at last.

"Look," I said, "your boss. The little guy who sold me the typewriter."

"What typewriter?" he asked blankly.

"The typewriter! My God, man, don't you know anything that goes on around here? The Remington Noiseless portable. The one that was in the window."

"A Remington? In my window?"

"Yes," I said patiently. "Right in your window." I pointed without turning around. "Right out there in your window. There. In the window."

"You're mistaken," he said.

"I'm not mistaken. Don't be foolish. I came in here this afternoon and bought a typewriter. A Remington Noiseless portable. It cost me five dollars, and...."

He shook his head vigorously. "Oh, no, no. You're mistaken."

"Oh hell, there's no sense talking to you. When will your boss be back?"

"I have no boss," he said indignantly. "I am my own boss. I *own* this shop."

"Oh," I said, "I see. Well, this fat guy probably works for you then. Is he out to supper?"

His eyes narrowed. "There is no fat guy working for me. There is nobody working for me. I work alone."

"Huh?"

"I-work-alone," he said slowly, as if he were repeating the sentence for a sub-level moron.

"Alone?" I gulped hard.

"Alone," he said firmly.

"Oh."

"Was there anything else I could do for you, sir?" he asked bitingly. "Before I close for the evening?"

"No. No, thank you. Thank you." I turned and walked out of the shop. On the sidewalk, I stopped to look up at the numbers on the door. They seemed to be the same numbers. And the three gold gilt balls hanging over the doorway seemed the same, too. I shrugged.

Perhaps I'd been wrong. There were a lot of pawn shops on Third Avenue, and maybe I'd just stumbled into the wrong one, being a little worked up and all. I started walking, stopping at the next pawn shop, ready to go in.

I noticed that the grillwork fence was already up. Gone for the day. I kept walking, stopped at two more closed, fenced shops and then decided I'd let it go for tonight. I'd start again early in the morning, looking for the fat old man with the bald head and the mustache. I'd find him then, and straighten this all out.

I went back to my room.

The typewriter was sitting where I'd left it.

I snatched the sheet of paper from the roller, tossed it onto the floor. I put a new sheet into the machine, and sat down to type what I wanted to type, knowing damned well I'd get Poe instead. I typed without looking at the sheet of paper, afraid almost at what I knew would be there. *The Murders In The Rue Morgue*, maybe. Or *Ulalume*, if the machine had forgotten I didn't write poetry.

I opened my eyes and stopped typing. I looked at what I'd written.

*The day was crisp and clear, with the promise of a mild afternoon in the air. It was the beginning of April, and Spring rustled her greenness and yawned leisurely. I walked along happily.*

"Well, I'll be damned," I said.

I leaned back, fully expecting some answer from the machine. There was none. I poked my forefinger at the shift key, tapped the space bar tentatively, rolled the roller, swung the carriage, sniffed at the ribbon.

"Have you gone?" I asked the typewriter.

There was no answer. I sighed happily and started to work, typing twelve pages of lousy prose which I tossed into the wastebasket. But I was happier than I'd been since I bought the infernal machine.

After a glass of orange juice, a cup of coffee, and a slice of burnt toast the next morning, I tackled the machine again.

This time, I was hot.

There was nothing to stop me. The words ran from my brain to my fingers, onto the keys, spilling onto the clean sheets of paper. I typed furiously, feeling right about my work, knowing I was doing well. It was as if the machine and I were one, as if my fingers had become an extension of the keys. I didn't stop to think once. As soon as I'd taken one sheet of paper from the machine, I rolled in another and kept going. The delay of changing paper was almost too much to bear. The words just tumbled out of me, and they were good words, and it was a good story.

I read it through when I finished it, sitting back and puffing happily on a cigarette. Then I put a clip on the pages, patted them fondly and went next door to see Perry. He was a sculptor, and he had his hands full of clay, and his stand full of what looked like a head.

"Wash your hands," I said.

"Why?" He gouged his thumb at the blob of clay on his stand, and an eye socket magically appeared.

I slapped the pages in my hand. "I want you to read this."

"Later," Perry said. He gouged out another eye socket.



"Now," I insisted. "It's the best thing I've ever done."

Perry considered this for the space of three seconds. "Oh, all right." He went to the small sink in the corner of the room, and rinsed the clay from his hands. He dried them quickly on a soiled towel, walked over to the lumpy divan that sprawled beneath his long window, and said, "Let's have it."

I extended the manuscript and he took it. I lit a cigarette and watched him while he read, my chest expanding with pride.

When he finished, he put the manuscript down beside him and lighted a cigarette of his own.

"A bit old fashioned, isn't it?" he asked.

"How so?" I answered, ready to spring to the defense of the story.

"Well, using Mesmerism for Hypnotism, for example."

"They're synonymous!" I shouted.

Perry stared at me curiously. "It's not a very well known story," he said, "but I still don't think you will get away with it—no matter how much innocence you profess."

"What in the name of God are you talking about?" I asked.

He slapped the back of his hand onto the manuscript. "This. *The Facts In The Case of M. Valdemar*. That's what."

"That's not the title I gave it," I said indignantly.

"No, but it's the title Poe gave it."

My mouth fell open. "Who? Who?"

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