

Get it in Writing

by Jonathan Caws-Elwitt © 2003

I wanted to be at the center of things, but just ended up caught in the middle.

I'm not sure how I became the ghost-writer for both Melissa DuBarge and Henry Alkins. No, that's not accurate. I *am* sure how it happened. I'm even pretty sure *why* it happened. Beautiful . . . four sentences in, and already I'm coming off like an insufferable know-it-all.

What you need to understand about me is my compulsive lust for the dissemination of my name. I do not crave fame. Fame, to me, is a sickening scenario revolving around the over-exposure of my personal identity. No, what I yearn for, with an insatiable, uninhibited appetite, is the experience of viewing those three little words "by Jeffrey Withers" displayed in a row of type that I did not personally set.

You might think that this would make me an unlikely candidate for ghost-writing. But I can see those three words wherever they belong, even where they have been rendered tactfully invisible by a lucrative contract. When Melissa approached me, I saw "by Jeffrey Withers" more clearly than I could see the color of her tinted contacts. When I got the call from Henry Alkins, the nervous buzz of the mouthpiece held too close to his lips purred that same, familiar phrase. It rose up before my eyes like my inaugural by-line, which had been attached to an exhaustive exploration of locker-decoration strategies on Page The First of a high-school newspaper. Above the fold, my friend.

If you don't keep up with the fine arts, the significance of the name Melissa DuBarge might be in the process of escaping you right about now. Relax – Jeffrey W. has the situation under control. Melissa is the self-proclaimed originator and principal exponent of the modern science of airbrush juggling. She gathers a crowd around her – usually a big crowd in a prestigious venue, these days – and creates a breathtaking landscape on an enormous canvas, while keeping three paint-spewing machines in the air at all times. Her talent for this exceptional activity is surpassed only by her sense of her own importance. And so last year she commissioned me to write her "autobiography", *Kinetic Kinniptions*.

Perhaps you are also a stranger to the fame of Henry Alkins. Henry happens to be, by his own account, the chronologically first and perpetually foremost practitioner of the contemporary craft of airbrush juggling. He is almost as concerned with the nuances of his gigantic masterpieces as he is with the lay of his toupee. Shortly after I met Melissa, Henry selected me to ghost-write his memoir, *Do I Have to Paint You a Picture?*

You might be thinking that I should have turned Henry down like a superfluous comforter. Or perhaps you're of the school that believes I'd have been wise to wiggle out of my deal with Melissa. But you're forgetting all that "by Jeffrey Withers" stuff -- which I thought was rather nicely done, actually.

"They tell me you're a first-class writer," Melissa began.

I was about to say something humble and witty like "How *do* these rumors get started!" But she didn't give me a chance.

"You understand now, I'm just going along with the advice of my staff. They read something of yours -- something about pumpkins, was it?"

Somewhere along the line, I had written a brochure for a local company that makes squash racquets. Not my best effort . . . but whatever works.

We were at a stylish bar where the staff knew Melissa DuBarge, not only by her reputation but also by her preferences. She asked politely, if loudly, for "a drink" and received a beaker of some wan chardonnay. I ordered the pinot noir, and soon found myself sipping a beverage whose flavor suggested a slightly corky fluoride rinse.

"I am prepared to assume that you're duly qualified for the privilege I wish to offer you," Melissa continued, "as far as your writing talent goes." She took a sip from her glass and made a face that set me wondering if it might be lemonade, after all. "What I'm more concerned about is whether you have what it takes to stay the course with a work that will need to be as monumental in scope as its subject -- myself -- am legendary in artistic stature." Wow, that was terrible stuff, I thought. I might even be able to use it in the book.

I assured her that I had plenty of experience "staying the course," from the bedroom (this got no laugh, despite a waggish wiggle of my naturally-bushy eyebrows) to the writing desk. "When I used to do comedy screenplays, our team would sometimes remain in a hotel room for days at a time, relying on Room Service to come up and feed us straight lines." That one got a laugh, albeit a sort of dismissive, Terry Gross sort of laugh. I was in.

Just between you and me, uncredited principal authorship of the Melissa DuBarge memoirs was the chunkiest freelance job that had come my way in a while. I was -- believe it or not -- looking forward to getting down to work and blowing the dust off of those three little invisible words.

Then things got complicated. I think I'd been making preliminary notes on Melissa for about a week, from her disorganized but voluminous personal archives, when my answering machine weighed in with an excessively-detailed overture from Henry. He held me fascinated while he told the machine all about the attractive advance and royalty schedule. But by the time he touched on the overseas rights, I felt that even my lawyer would have been fidgeting in her seat.

Now, I'd been reading a lot about Henry. Because you don't read about Melissa DuBarge without also reading about Henry Alkins. It simply can't be done. In each clipping, in every industry wrap-up, they are always side by side, neck and neck, two expletives uttered in a single breath. But somehow the particular clippings that made it into the DuBarge archive always seemed to leave one with the impression that she was the real thing, and he just a paint-spurting afterthought. I couldn't help wondering what the Alkins archive would reveal to the trained eye. So I took the meeting, thinking there was no harm in that. I didn't have to say yes, after all. Just the same, I didn't see any reason to tell Melissa that I'd heard from the competition. They say Hollywood's a small town, and this is just the way these things happen.

The fact that we all actually lived in San Francisco didn't change the relevance of the cliché, as far as I was concerned.

Henry had invited me to breakfast on the terrace. I might as well confess to you here and now that I'm not much good at Breakfast On The Terrace. Scarcely had I arrived, when I dropped my brioche over the railing -- to the delight of the neighborhood pigeons. "A nod to Galileo," I said, with smile charismatic and shrug affable, to a Ms. Kendricks, Henry's personal assistant. She did not respond to the gag in any way. I took the liberty of attributing this blatant failure on her part to some sort of momentary memory lapse that had robbed her of the significance, to the history of Western science, of the great thinker to whom I'd made whimsical allusion. Henry had not joined us yet, and I was thinking it was about freakin' time he did.

"Ms. Kendricks! Is he here yet?" came a fussy voice from within.

"Yes, Mr. Alkins. We've just been talking about Galileo, the Renaissance scientist who did important experiments regarding gravity." So much for my theory. I fell back on the supposition that her stylish glasses had the unfortunate side effect of deflecting humor.

"Never mind Gally O'Leo," I distinctly heard Alkins answer -- referring, no doubt, to an Irish painter beyond my ken. "This writer fellow is crucial to me. I need to make a good impression!" Henry Alkins was clearly different from Melissa DuBarge in personality, if not in artistic style. He also evidently labored under the impression that the "writer fellow" was currently out of earshot, whereas earshot was exactly what I was very much within. This notwithstanding (an expression I use often but do not, I confess, completely understand), I was eager to meet him face to face.

My patience was soon rewarded, as the terrace was enhanced by the entrance of what seemed to be a vigorous toupee riding skillfully upon a foppish, diminutive man. From the look of reverence on the face of young Ms. Kendricks, however, one would have thought we were celebrating the arrival of Bono from U2.

I really thought characters like Henry Alkins had gone out with the advent of Technicolor. A man in his late thirties . . . his very late thirties . . . his very, very late thirties . . . with a fussy little mustache, a fussy little face, and vain little lips pouting anxiously above a fussy chin. For pete's sake, he even wore a dressing-gown. And I don't mean a bathrobe -- I myself have been known to attend meetings in my bathrobe, though rarely at breakfast-time -- I mean a dressing-gown, dammit. Under which, as far as I could tell, he was completely and rather formally dressed. Now, my own motto is "a scintillating mind in a casual body," but I believe that each individual should be attired in whatever manner he or she feels most relaxed with. For the record, though, "relaxed" is not the way I could describe Henry at that particular moment. In fact, he was too busy futzing and twittering even to introduce himself.

Finally, Ms. Kendricks ushered Henry to the outdoor breakfast table, and he acknowledged my presence. His focus became suddenly sharp -- the mark of a great artist, I asked myself? I wasn't convinced, but I filed the thought away for later.

"Mr. Withers," said Henry abruptly. "Before I offer you the job of assisting me with my autobiography, I must ask you one technical question." I nodded indulgently and braced

myself for some sort of impossible query about printing-press technology. After all, it's just the sort of people who hire ghost-writers who don't understand that the writer doesn't actually *make* the books.

"I value organization above almost anything," Henry continued. "Organization is -- " He stopped talking, as abruptly as he'd begun, and began to look around for Ms. Kendricks. Fortunately, she had seated herself at one of his dressing-gowned elbows. "Ms. Kendricks! Wasn't I supposed to wear the pinstriped trousers today?"

"Possibly, Mr. Alkins."

"Yes, I'm sure of it. Solid trousers on Monday and Tuesday, pinstripes on Thursday and Friday, khakis on weekends of course." I wondered if he went bottomless on Wednesdays, or stayed in bed all day.

"But it *is* Tuesday," said Ms. Kendricks accurately.

"Oh! Of course. How silly of me. I always mix up Tuesday and Friday."

"Friday comes after Thursday, Mr. Alkins." It was probably better that she said it, though I was about to.

"Yes, yes, I know," said Henry impatiently. "But I mean that Tuesday and Friday have similar *flavors*." More great artist stuff? I wondered.

There was a dreary silence, as neither Ms. Kendricks nor I knew what to say in reply to this. Ms. Kendricks found her voice first. "Your solid trousers are such an *effervescent* shade of blue, Mr. Alkins." I marvelled at her choice of adjective. For the first time, I studied the kind grey eyes behind the Galileo-joke-impairing spectacles.

"Organization," Henry emphasized, returning to his theme. "I must know, Mr. Withers, what sort of organizational system you use, as a writer."

"I rely almost exclusively on the NPO paradigm," I averred. Henry nodded sagely, and I guessed that he didn't realize that the NPO was a system of my own invention, and that the abbreviation stood for "No Particular Order". Henry pushed the previously-inventoried contract across the table at me, and Ms. Kendricks gave me a funny look with her mouth.

As you know, I accepted Henry's commission. I could do justice to both of them, I told myself. And what an economical pairing of projects, from a research point of view! With a little discretion (a trait Jeffrey Withers has in abundance, thank you very much), no one need know of my divided loyalties, and the world would get two excellent (if insignificant) books that flattered its subjects equally well. I decided to continue applying myself to Melissa's book for now, as the deadline was nearer; but, at every opportunity, I marked my notes for later reference with regard to Henry.

The DuBarge book would have taken shape with a lot more authenticity if she hadn't been involved in it. I'll never forget the meeting we had about midway through the project, over another round of chardonnay-lemonade and dental-grade pinot.

"Jeffrey," she began, "I know it's hard to imagine, but I wasn't always a star. When I was starting out, I really had to struggle to get my name out there. You have no idea what it was like in those days."

Well, maybe I would have had no idea what it was like in those days -- if she hadn't already told me what it was like in those days, at great length and in exhaustive detail, at every previous meeting. But this time, she got to the point relatively quickly.

"There seems to be a lot of -- ahem -- Henry Alkins in my book." Personally, I hate those emphatic throat-clears. I'm a staunch believer in the simple, physiologically-driven, non-signifying throat-clear.

"My book," she repeated, and she hefted the manuscript with the hand that didn't have a chardonnay in it.

"Well, let's face it, Melissa. Though you're the undisputed (I lied) Original, his career has paralleled -- er, I mean *shadowed* -- your own. He's part of the essential context, the backdrop against which your drama has played out." I don't know -- I thought that was kind of eloquent, myself.

But Melissa snorted. Not a pretty sight, I might add. "Alkins is nothing but a Jimmy-come-lately."

"You mean a *Johnny*-come-lately."

"He's *everybody* come lately. Why, he's just the squeaky fifth wheel on the bandwagon. Hey, that's good, Jeffrey. You could use that in the book."

I hate working with amateurs. They're so unprofessional. "I don't think so, Melissa."

"And why not?"

"Well, if you must know, it's a mixed metaphor."

"A *who*?"

"What I mean," I persisted, "is that you've got two or three different images mixed up there. The squeaky wheel that gets the most oil; the unnecessary fifth wheel; the bandwagon-jumper"

"Exactly! He's an unnecessary, squeaky wheel jumping on the bandwagon. It's perfect."

"If you say so."

"So you'll use it in the book?"

Her deluded grin was reflected in my discomfited wince. "No, I won't. It's bad writing."

"Writing, schmiting. This isn't about writing, this is about publishing. That's the trouble with you literary types -- you're always putting the horse before the cart."

Things were definitely deteriorating. "You mean 'the cart before the horse.' You're *supposed* to put the horse before the cart."

"Well, I *did*. So what's the problem? You know something, Jeffrey, I don't think you listen very attentively."

"That's not fair, Melissa."

"All right, all right. I guess I'm just upset because you never use my ideas. Jeez, who's the author of this autobiography you're writing for me, anyway!"

Luckily, the waiter interrupted us at this juncture. I was hoping that when he'd gone the subject would change. But it didn't change much.

"Before I forget," said Melissa. "I want you to make sure you talk about geraniums throughout the book. It's an important symbol to me."

I took out my notebook, under a momentary misapprehension that constructive business was transpiring. "Okay -- geraniums. Symbol. Got it. What do they symbolize?"

Melissa looked as blank as her chardonnay.

"That is, what does this symbol mean?"

The blank look turned absurdly patronizing. "It doesn't mean *anything*. It's just a symbol."

"But a symbol *has* to mean something. It's a symbol *of* this or that . . . or even of several things at once. That's what the word 'symbol' means."

"Well, for now it's just a plain symbol. I'll decide what it means later, when I've got more time."

This seemed as good a place as any to put Melissa's book aside for the moment and re-organize my work around Henry, so that I could embark on his project and proceed apace. (Word I want, but a stupid one.) A draft went over to him in another couple of weeks, and within twenty-four he told my answering machine he needed to see me regarding some "problems" with the manuscript.

"Hello, Henry," I said cheerfully as I entered the apartment. "Hello, Ms. Kendricks."

"Eveline," she said to my shoes.

Henry ushered me to a seat at a fussy little table. Before taking the chair opposite, he darted to the wall and hit a dimmer button. "Let's get some light on the subject," he said mechanically. One of *those*, I thought, as I have a category in my mind for people who are incapable of turning on a lamp without saying "Let's get some light on the subject." I always wonder if they say it even when alone.

As Henry took his seat, I was admiring the impeccable lines and fully-integrated palette of his décor. "Your home is a work of art, Henry," I said sincerely through the crisp haze of sophistication that I felt engulfing me.

"Can we please try to focus on the work I've hired you to do?" he replied.

"Certainly," I acquiesced.

"Is my hair all right?"

"Excuse me?"

"Tchahh!" Henry scoffed. "Ms. Kendricks?"

"Yes, Mr. Alkins."

"My hair?"

"Of course, Mr. Alkins."

"Satisfactory?"

"It's the best it's looked all day," Eveline testified.

"Thank you. Now then, Jeffrey, what can I do for you?"

"I believe you had some concerns about the manuscript, Henry."

"Oh! The manuscript. I certainly do. Jeffrey --" He hesitated.

"Yes, Henry?" I sounded tired, no doubt.

"Do you think this necktie is all right for discussing manuscripts?"

"I couldn't have chosen a better one myself."

"I don't understand it," said Henry.

"Oh. Well, it's just a way of saying that your neckwear is the best I can imagine."

"No, no," he said. "I don't understand how she got in."

I cocked my head in the direction of Eveline. "Wasn't she already here?"

Eveline spoke. "What he doesn't understand is how Melissa DuBarge came to feature so prominently in a book that is supposed to be the story of Henry Alkins. It hurts his feelings a little bit."

I don't think, if I were setting out at an architect's workstation to diagram the thing, that I would have chosen to have Henry Alkins present when I first kissed Eveline Kendricks. But one's control over these scenarios is often limited, and so it was that I kissed Eveline even while she kept an adoring, daughterly eye turned on Henry.

I left soon after, vaguely promising revisions. Eveline's mouth opened, not to speak, but . . . to laugh. Softly, kindly, and with both eyes definitely turned my way, irises burning mirth through spectacles.

Two hours later, a knock aroused me from an ambulatory trance of writer's block. I had been profiting from the involuntary break to prepare a snack, but I was having a teeny problem with the sandwich fixings. (If you must know, I had squirted mustard all over the counter.) I opened the door, and it was she.

As Eveline entered my apartment for the first time, she glanced in the direction of my humming, unproductive computer, then at the mess in the kitchenette. "Are you at an impasse?" she asked.

Over the weeks that followed, I rewrote both manuscripts. In my desire to recover from the twin setbacks, I even deviated from the NPO Paradigm. From 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. each day, I shaped Melissa's story into an awe-inspiring tale in which the name "Henry Alkins" was a mere rumor. Then, between 2 and 6, I recounted the triumphs of Henry, as he dazzled a world in which Melissa DuBarge was conspicuous only by her absence.

"I don't know," said Melissa. "It's missing something."

"I must re-fold my pocket handkerchief," commented Henry.

Now the sock was really on the other shoe. I waited a day before confronting them -- not because I necessarily follow the "count to ten" school, but because I happened to have a lot of laundry to catch up on. And so, the next night, I met Melissa at the usual place and reminded her, using a master wordsmith's command of detail, perspective, and chiaroscuro, that she'd made me take out all the Henry stuff, which had provided all the necessary contrast and relief, and that, as a result, her book was, as she so imprecisely put it, "missing something". "It's all your own fault, smartass," I summed up angrily.

"I don't think you're helping things by calling me a wiseass," she sniffed.

"I didn't call you a wiseass, I called you a smartass. You'll need to study nights if you want to earn the epithet of 'wiseass'."

It was not my most productive meeting.

As I walked home, I decided that it might be shrewder to confront Henry via the U.S. Mail. I composed in my head:

My Dear Henry:

Your tie is enrapturing, your toupee is poetry, your dressing-gown is ambrosia and your apartment an historic event. And you, my friend, are a conceited pimple who doesn't know a good thing when he sees it.

*Sincerely and harrumph,
Jeffrey Withers*

But I didn't send it.

I considered selling Melissa's book to Henry and Henry's book to Melissa. Attractive though this possibility was on a conceptual level, I was realistic enough to know that it wouldn't really solve the problems.

Melissa's phone voice was surprisingly ingratiating when next I heard from her. "Jeffrey," -- or did she maybe even say "Jeffrey, darling"? -- "I need a favor. You've got to abandon the book."

"Huh?"

"They're making a TV movie about me, and the contract stipulates that they have the option to do a tie-in coffee table thing. I am not to authorize any potentially-competing biographies. You will find my kill fee most generous, I'm sure. The agreement is already in the mail to you. All you have to do is sign."

Well, this simplified things, but I was more than a little disappointed. My name on a check -- even a generous one -- is no substitute for a book credit, even an invisible one.

And though it simplified things, it didn't change the fact that my remaining client was still not happy with either the version of his memoir that duly noted his rival or the version that wrote her out of the plot.

Of course, I could put a little bit of Melissa back into Henry's book, here and there -- just enough to show that she was really no competition. But I realized now that it would be no fun working on Henry's book without the secret counterweight of Melissa's to add spice to the set-up. I wondered if I should finish Melissa's anyway -- just for my own amusement -- and then destroy it after I completed Henry's. Surely her Agreement couldn't bar me from doing *that*.

These musings were interrupted by a visit from Eveline.

"I have some unfortunate news," she blurted. "Henry has decided that an autobiography is not a glamorous enough way to further his fame. He wants something more -- *sexy*, was the word he used."

"It's a good word," I conceded. It had made me tingle to watch her say that word.

"So instead, he's made arrangements to collaborate with an alternative popular music group on some sort of multimedia concept album. They're called the Palm Lamps." She turned, for a moment, into an enthusiastic teenager and chirped, "Have you heard of them?"

"No," I apologized. "I don't really . . ." I trailed off, figuring that once you've been asked if you've heard of a band and you've said you don't really dot dot dot, the issue is pretty much closed.

"Um," she continued. "This is a little embarrassing. Henry has asked me to offer you one of his paintings in lieu of a kill fee. It was his idea," she clarified unnecessarily.

"That will be fine."

Eveline's coat had draped itself affectionately over the knobby part of a wooden chair. She now moved to my couch, and sat beside me in such a way as to hint at no plans for getting up and leaving any time soon.

"Thank you, Jeffrey," she said.

"You are very welcome," I replied. "In fact," I smiled, "you are one of the welcomest people I've ever known."