



## Cressandra Conquers the \$5,000 CS Open

After ten years without a sale, I gave up screenwriting. Three weeks later I won the CS Open.

BY CRESSANDRA THIBODEAUX

*CS Open Coordinator Jim Cirile notes that, "After years of trying, Cress Thibodeaux at last hit it out of the park—and no one deserved to win more than she did. Hers is a story of tenacity and triumph."*

IT'S LATE SATURDAY NIGHT when I get the call. "Hello, is this Cressandra?"

"Yes," I say.

"I'm calling on behalf of the CS Open."

"I didn't make it, huh?"

"No, you *did*. Congratulations for making it to the third round. You have to be here tomorrow morning at ten. Good luck."

Last year a documentary crew followed a fellow named Cregg Lund to the CS Open. Since I had befriended him in Round One, the crew interviewed me concerning Cregg's chances at winning. I told them he was very sure of himself, but it bothered me when he asked me out and told me to swing by the room after he was done competing in Round Two.

"Why?" the cameraman asked.

"Because he never thought I might be in the room."

I had scored an 84 and needed an 89 to advance to Round Two, but I wasn't quitting. I've participated in the CS Open, every single year since it began (four years straight) and every year, I sit right up front, cranking out four or five sections in a row. Even when judges inform me that I've advanced to the next round, I don't stop. Last year I competed in Round One four times. One reason was it's so much fun to write with parameters. You write things you'd never write otherwise. But mostly it's extremely rewarding to have your work read and critiqued.

Last year, Cregg made it to Round Three but never reached the finals. I'm sure he was crushed when he was dropped. I know I was when earlier that morning I saw my name on Round Three wiped from the bulletin board. "Sorry," Coverage, Ink founder and

CS Open Coordinator Jim Cirile apologized. "We're only accepting the top 12 people."

I had been number thirteen.

I quickly ducked into the Writer's Room to regroup. It was dimly lit. A teacher was showing a group of writers a slide show. I took a seat in the back and began to cry. A woman came over with a box of Kleenex and patted my shoulder. I continued to sit, thankful it was dark.

Now it's 2005. Sunday morning. My alarm goes off, but I'm already up. The excitement of finally making it to Round Three after years of trying has kept me



up most of the night. I arrive at the L.A. Convention Center. Inside the CS Open room, Jim greets the sixteen contestants with a smile.

"Your PROTAGONIST and FAMILY," Jim begins the parameters, "are on vacation in another country when he (or she) is mistaken for a small town hero..." I write a scene about Jesus on vacation with Mary and Joseph when he's mistaken for Pedro, a small-town hero who could turn water into wine. When I turn it in, I worry that my Jesus comes across a little fascist, but the main theme of the piece is "religious tolerance," so I'm hoping for a little tolerance from the judges.

A few hours later, Jim approaches me in the cafeteria. "Cressandra?"

"I didn't make it, huh?"

He breaks into a toothy smile. "You made it! Your scene was chosen to be acted out at the closing ceremonies."

I feel heavy, I've got to sit down. "Thank you," I say, more stunned than anything. The next few hours are a blur of anxiousness and dread. Finally the closing ceremonies begin. The three scenes are acted out on stage, the audience of 1,100 writers votes, and the votes are counted. Jim calls the three finalists onto the stage...

"Second runner-up goes to Jeffrey Dellinger," Jim announces, and the audience applauds. Jeffrey takes his check, shakes Jim's hand, and smiles for the camera. "First place runner-up," Jim states, "goes to D.R. Paylor." I accidentally think she's won first place. D.R. jumps up and down and embraces Jim. I say to myself, "Clap, don't look like a poor sport."

Jim continues, "I'd like to say a few words before we give out the final award. Cressandra Thibodeaux has competed in the CS Open for several years in a row..." That's when it hits me. I lean forward and ask the first runner-up, "Hey, did you win first place?" She says, "No! *You* did!" A few people in the audience laugh. It's then that I become overwhelmed.

I've been screenwriting for ten years. I've written sixteen scripts, none of which have sold, and actually I'm embarrassed to admit that I had given up screenwriting three weeks prior. This is why winning the CS Open and finally getting an agent is so weirdly bittersweet. And so when I begin to cry, it's a combination of guilt and the feeling washing over me of unconditional support by my peers.

When I finally get home, I e-mail Cregg. I haven't contacted him for almost a year, and all I write is, "I won!" I smile, knowing he'll understand exactly what I mean. **CS**