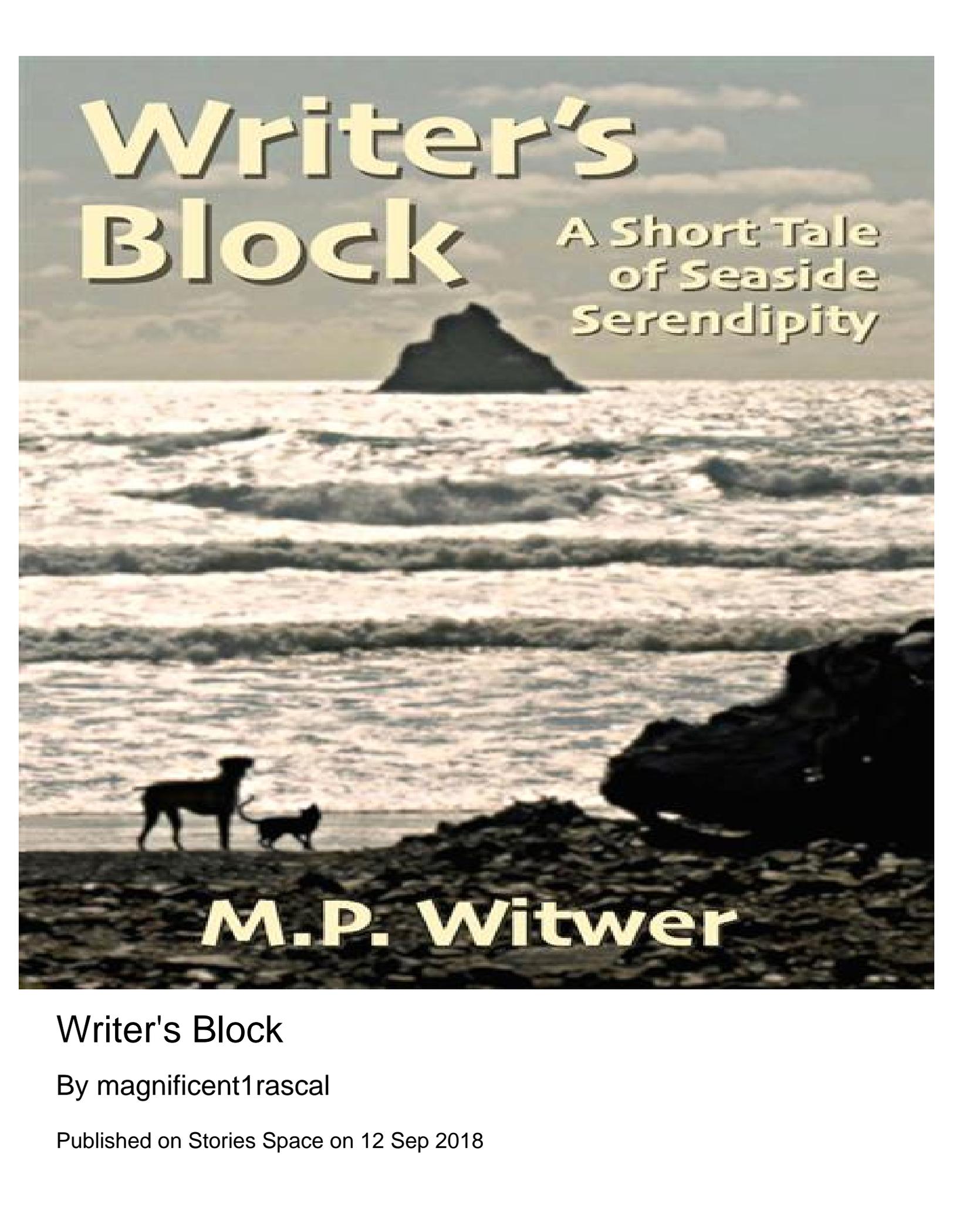


# Writer's Block

A Short Tale  
of Seaside  
Serendipity



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A Short Tale of Seaside Serendipity

<https://www.storiesspace.com/stories/general/writers-block.aspx>

THE CALENDAR TAUNTED JANE, its little yellow-highlighted square outlined in a bold red stroke mocking her lack of progress.

‘You’re going to miss the deadline, you know. I’m just six weeks away now,’ it scoffed. ‘Whatever made you apply for that fellowship anyhow, and what could the panel have been thinking when they gave it to you? You’re no writer; you’ve proven that over the past ten and half months.’

She glared at it before turning her attention back to the blank screen before her.

‘All you had to do was write one measly story. Any subject, any genre, anywhere between two and seven thousand words. You had free rein! But could you do it? Nooooo,’ the calendar dripped with sarcasm. ‘And now you’re going to have to give back the money. Seventy-five hundred bucks.’

“I need a change of scenery,” she said, closing her MacBook Air and shooting the calendar another dirty look as she gathered the notebook computer and other writing materials in her arms, happy to leave her office and slam the door on the insolence within it.

She could do this, she knew she could. The deadline wasn’t for six whole weeks. Surely she ought to be able to write volumes in that amount of time. A friend boasted that he had written each of his many published pieces in a single sitting, and others reported writing upwards of 10,000 words a day. Jane heaved a sigh. She wasn’t one of those writers. On a good day, she was lucky to conjure up 500 words. For her, the entire six weeks would be necessary.

Working in the dining room, away from the impertinent calendar, would be the magic fix for her writer’s block, she told herself. It was her favorite room in the house: quiet, spacious and comfortable, the scene of many of her most treasured memories, and quite conducive to creativity. She spread out her gear on the large table, set down her cup of tea, and started to write.

The words came in a rush. Her typing a blur, she raced to get her thoughts onto the screen. When their flow finally slowed to a trickle she sat back and took a sip of her tea, by then a bitter and cold brew that made her grimace.

“Well, that won’t do at all,” she said, carrying the cup to the kitchen to make a fresh pot. Upon returning, she savored the delicate blend while reviewing her masterful prose.

What she read nearly made her choke.

“Garbage! Utter rubbish!” She held down the backspace key, obliterating the dreck, and started fresh. Again and again, however, bursts of inspiration would be followed by agonizing stretches of recrimination and self-doubt.

Her mood soured, soon everything began to grate on her nerves: the incessant tick-tock of the clock (not to mention its twice-hourly cuckooing), the unchanging view out the window, the stare of the goldfish at her back.

“Whoa, I really need a change of scenery,” she declared at the realization that she actually had imagined the fish was staring at her.

After a whirlwind hour spent reserving a cottage in an unassuming community on the Oregon coast, cleaning out the refrigerator, arranging for a neighbor to pick up the mail and feed the fish, and packing the essentials for an extended absence, Jane sank into an overstuffed armchair, exhausted.

“You are correct, laddie, adventure is afoot, but you needn’t worry — you’re coming along for it. I couldn’t leave you behind.” She stroked the silky ears of the Rottweiler that had laid its head on her lap, a pair of soulful brown eyes meeting her look, and smiled down at the dog.

BY THE FOLLOWING EVENING they were settled into a tiny seaside bungalow. Jane sipped a glass of Willamette Valley pinot noir, her second from the bottle the property manager had left as a welcome, while her canine companion kept busy with a locally made sweet potato chew out of the same gift basket.

“Yes, I ought to be writing,” she said with a sigh, doing her best to ignore the vibes being put out by the desk where her computer stood ready for use, “but I am rather tired after driving for six hours, stocking the pantry and rearranging the furniture. What do you say we just relax tonight and get an early start in the morning?”

The 110-pound dog stretched, yawned and groaned in agreement with the plan, at least the “just relax tonight” part of it.

Jane awoke the next morning with the best of intentions to make significant inroads with her writing, although she knew it would only be the start of a long journey. As the day wore on, however, the starts kept stalling and the destination seemed more distant than ever.

“Oh! Why can’t I do as I taught my students all those years: Get something on the page and worry about correcting it later?”

'Those who can't do, teach,' a familiar voice reminded her.

"Well, those who no longer teach, do," she said resolutely. She found it easier to stand up to the calendar from a distance. "The question is just what to 'do.' Perhaps a parody..."

"It was a dark and stormy night," she typed, "when Johnny blew into town like a bull in a china shop. It goes without saying that he thought he was the greatest thing since sliced bread, and most of the girls in the sleepy burg gushed as though he had hung the moon. In the eyes of the town fathers, however, he was a horse of a different color. They saw him as a snake in the grass, a fox in the henhouse, a rascalion with a touch of the blarney. Johnny was every parent's worst nightmare, but the town found itself out of the frying pan and into the fire the morning he was discovered in the middle of Main Street, dead as a doornail."

Jane read the paragraph and laughed for the first time in days. Although it wasn't suitable for the literary piece that was supposed to be presented at the conference the following month, she saved her bit of silliness in a file labeled "Johnny" before rising to put another log on the fire. Engrossed as she'd been, both the passage of time and the change in the weather outside caught her unawares.

"Oh dear, it really is a dark and stormy night!" She grabbed a pair of beach towels and spread one out in the entryway before opening the door to summon the dog inside.

"Stormy!" she called. The Rottweiler wasn't waiting by the door as she had expected. She stepped out, under the protection of the eaves, and scanned the fenceline. "Stormy, time to come in!" Her eyes adjusted to the darkness so she was able to discern a silhouette at the far corner of the yard. "Stormy! Get in here, now!"

Stormy finally responded, barreling full force toward her. Anticipating his arrival, Jane blocked the door with her body, and he came to a stop just inches shy of running into her, wiggling his entire hindquarters in an attempt to wag his stump of a tail properly.

"What were you doing out there?" she asked, leading the soaked dog inside and beginning to dry him off. "I must have looked quite the fool, standing outside yelling 'Stormy' like some sort of town crier reporting a fact that everyone can see for themselves."

Just then, something small and black darted from under the dog and into the house.

"Hello, what's this? Did you go out and find yourself a feline friend?"

She reached for another towel and approached the cat, which was as wet as Stormy had been, and also as friendly. It purred softly as Jane wiped the mud off its bedraggled coat. That done, she noticed the creature had rust-colored accents on its nose, chest and paws.

"I can see why you were drawn to it, Stormy, but I must tell you, this is not a miniature Rottweiler!"

She held it up to get a closer look.

“No collar, I see, but that’s not a surprise. Well, you can’t go back out in this weather — I wouldn’t send a dog out on a night like this. Maybe your person will come looking for you, and you can wait it out with us ’til then. I don’t have any cat food, of course; do you think you can make do with a bit of tuna?” The volume of the cat’s purr increased noticeably, and Jane laughed at the response. “Yes, I thought you’d find that acceptable. Most of your ilk are tuna junkies, I’ve found.”

As she addressed the cat, Stormy watched intently, patiently waiting for his supper.

“I’m going to shut you in the bathroom while the two of you eat,” she explained to the newcomer. “Even though you’re getting along fine now, who knows what may happen when food is involved.”

After pouring out a large portion of kibble for the dog, she opened a can of tuna and slipped a saucerful into the bathroom, then went to see what she could find in the way of makeshift facilities for their guest.

“We’re all set!” she announced as she stepped back in a few minutes later. “There was some cat litter in the garage, and I found this basket that’ll be just the right size for a bed...”

Jane pulled up at the sight of the open bathroom door. She poked her head into the room. No cat. She went down the short hallway into the main room and found the unlikely pair asleep on Stormy’s orthopedic pillow, the dog snoring lightly while the cat nestled against him, purring loudly.

“Or, I guess you can sleep here,” she said, covering them with a blanket and padding away softly to the bedroom.

Her own sleep was fitful, disrupted by sounds of the storm — driving rain, howling winds, and crashing waves — as well as bizarre dreams of a calendar chasing her through the hallways of the school where she had taught English composition for 35 years, but the following morning brought clear skies, calm air, and the pressing demands of two animals which needed her attention: her dog Stormy and the adorable cat. After everyone had eaten breakfast, Jane decided a walk on the beach was in order for her and the big Rottweiler.

“Much as we enjoyed your company, it’s time for you to go home,” she told the diminutive cat. “I’m sure your family misses you.”

Stormy bounded over the rocks down to the sand, a nimble feline shadow keeping pace with his every step. Jane rolled her eyes, picked up a small bucket and shovel, and followed the pair.

“Stormy, time to go in!” she called an hour later, after she had thoroughly explored the tidepools, collecting dozens of shells plus a few small pieces of driftwood, and the animals had raced up and down the stretch of beach so many times she’d lost count.

AS SHE CLIMBED BACK toward the house, a glint in the sunlight caught her attention. Bending down to see what bauble was trapped among the rocks bordering the fence, she retrieved a metal tag attached to a tiny collar — a cat-sized collar, perhaps? When Stormy arrived seconds later, she scooped up his companion and held the loop of black nylon up for comparison.

“It looks to be your size, all right. Did you wriggle out of this?” As always, the cat replied by starting to purr. Jane shook her head in admonishment. “Are you deliberately working your way into my affections or do you behave this way around everyone you meet? I wish you wouldn’t, because it will just make it more difficult for us when you go back to whoever is missing you right now.”

After toweling off the animals on the patio, she unlocked the door and let them inside. They made a beeline for the comfortable dog bed, once again snuggling together, and Jane hesitated a moment before picking up the telephone and dialing the number on the tag.

A masculine voice answered on the second ring.

“Hello?”

“Hello. I found something on the beach last night that may belong to you. Can you describe it for me?” Fond as she’d become of the cat, she almost hoped the man wouldn’t be able to.

“Well, it’s small and black,” he said, “and I hope it’s being worn by a creature that matches the same description. She has burnt orange markings and appears in the form of a cat, but in reality behaves much more like a dog, except for possessing a notable propensity to purr.”

Jane smiled. It didn’t come as a surprise that the delightful feline lived with an equally charming man.

“Both items are here, but I should tell you, they appeared separately.”

“Thank you so much for calling – that little dickens had me worried sick! Where can I pick up the miscreant?”

The question caught her off guard. She wasn’t sure she ought to give out her location to a complete stranger, but quickly decided it would be all right. It wasn’t her home address, after all, and a large Rottweiler at her side was sufficient to intimidate most people.

“We’re on the ocean side of Carnahan, second house from the end,” she told him.

“She made it quite a distance! I’m a mile or so south of you, near the old general store. Thank goodness you’re on the same side of the highway; I was up half the night fretting that she might have tried to cross it. I’ve been out looking, fearing the worst.”

Hearing his obvious concern and affection for her visitor, Jane’s liking for the man grew. When he showed up at the house moments later, the level of his distress became more apparent: He looked

like an unmade bed. Yet even unshaven, with rebellious hair and a wrinkled, misbuttoned shirt, he still made a favorable impression; kind eyes and a quick smile outweighed a pressed appearance every time, she thought.

“Hi, I’m Martin,” he said, extending his hand. “I belong to the trespasser.”

“Jane,” she replied graciously. “And rest assured, she’s been no trouble at all. Won’t you come in? Your cat and my dog are having a nap after a rambunctious spell down on the beach this morning.”

“Together? Stormy’s sleeping with a dog?”

She looked at him quizzically.

“Do you mean to say the cat’s name is Stormy?”

“Yes, why?”

“Because my dog’s name is Stormy too! Tell me, when you said she behaved more like a dog than a cat, did that include...”

“...coming when she’s called, yes,” he finished.

“That explains it,” Jane said. “Every time I called my Stormy, yours came too.”

“It’s odd, though...I’ve never known her to befriend another animal.”

“Well, they’ve certainly become compadres. See for yourself.”

His eyes widened.

“Wow, you really meant you had a dog, didn’t you? Is it, um, friendly?”

“He’s not mean, but I’m sorry to say he is rather sexist. He normally doesn’t take to men.” After a beat, she added, “I think Peter was the only man he ever truly liked.”

“Peter is your...”

“...my husband.” Jane paused. “We lost him two years ago, to cancer. He’s the one who insisted we get Stormy; when he fell ill, he wanted to make sure I had a big, scary guard dog to protect me after he was gone. We got the ‘big’ part with Stormy, but he is a gentle soul.”

“Well, the world doesn’t know he’s a pansy. All they see is a Rottweiler, and that’s enough to frighten away would-be wrongdoers. Your husband made a very wise choice, if you ask me.”

Jane warmed to Martin right away. She liked his wit, down-to-earth manner, messy hair, and rumpled clothing... A sudden yearning for human companionship led her to suggest, "Would you care to stay for lunch? We could let the sleeping dogs lie for a bit."

After an initial protest that he couldn't possibly put her to any more trouble, Martin acquiesced with the stipulation that she must allow him to take her out to dinner in reciprocation.

"All right," Jane began over their grilled cheese sandwiches and tomato soup, "you know the story behind my pansy watchdog. I'd like to hear how your Stormy came to you."

"Not much to tell, really: My ex chose the cat, and the cat chose me. Although she always claimed Stormy was hers, Stormy preferred me from the outset, and it became quite blatant as the strain between us increased. By the end, when Heather was packing to leave, Stormy disappeared into the back of my closet for two days. I think she knew Heather wanted to take her away from me, and she wouldn't hear of it."

"Did your ex-wife ever threaten a custody battle? I've heard of such disputes over pets these days."

"We weren't married, thank goodness, and she didn't have any paperwork proving ownership of the cat, so there wasn't any legitimate claim to be made."

Their conversation continued for more than an hour in a relaxed and amiable fashion. They talked as familiars, not people who had only just met. When Martin reluctantly started to make his leave, his progress was blocked by a large canine nudging him with his muzzle while wagging a nub of a tail. Meanwhile, Jane found herself showered once again by the affections of his eight-pound conspirator.

"Do you suppose they're confused?" she asked.

"No, I think they know exactly what they're doing," he replied, patting the withers of the dog that didn't like men.

They walked out to his car, the dog sticking close to him while Jane held the purring feline in her arms. The two humans looked at each other.

"It's time for an exchange of prisoners," Martin said, reaching out for his charge.

"Not without terms, though," she responded, putting out a hand to hold onto the Rottweiler's collar. "We walk twice a day, morning and afternoon. Just so you know that company will be more than welcome..."

Martin laughed as he settled into the car, began to drive away, then stopped. "Tomorrow morning at ten then, rain or shine." Without waiting for a reply, he started off again before slamming on the brakes. "But first, dinner tonight." On the third attempt, he succeeded at making his exit. The cat sat on the back window ledge, peering at them.

Jane and Stormy watched as the car drove away. The dog leaned heavily against her leg, whimpering softly.

“Don’t worry, laddie,” she assured him, petting those silky ears, “we’ve not seen the last of that pair.”

THE NEXT TWO WEEKS seemed to pass in an instant, a fortnight during which Jane scarcely spared a thought for the story she was supposed to be writing or the shame failure would bring.

“Jane, I need to ask you something,” Martin said as they were sharing a bottle of wine after dinner one night.

“Yes?” Her stomach tightened.

“What are you doing here, really? You’re more than a retired schoolteacher on holiday. When we first met, your computer was always out and looked to be in use. Now it’s closed and stowed away. What’s the story?”

Jane looked down, ashamed.

“I’ve been embarrassed to tell you,” she started, and proceeded to spill everything about the fellowship, the requirement to publish, and the terminal case of writer’s block from which she was suffering.

“Let me get this straight. You were embarrassed to tell me you’d won a writing fellowship, the only one awarded last year in Washington state?”

“No. I was embarrassed to tell you I failed.”

“But you haven’t failed! How much time is left until the deadline?”

“Three and a half weeks.”

“You can do this. We just have to figure out something for you to write about.”

“That’s the trouble! None of my ideas are worthy. I’ve read the works of past winners; they’re all serious literary pieces, the type of thing I just don’t seem to have in me.”

“Jane, honey,” Martin said, touching her arm, “what sort of writing samples did you submit with your application? Were they serious literary work or general fiction that you now deem unworthy?”

“Three short stories, all lighthearted mainstream pieces, and a couple of humorous poems.”

“That’s what earned you the fellowship. Why do you think they’d expect something completely

different from you now?”

“I - I don't know,” she admitted.

“Well, there you have it! Don't try to write some hoity-toity literary gobbledygook. Write what you want to write. Now, what do you want to write?”

“I can't very well write about Johnny, the greatest thing since sliced bread who ended up dead as a doornail in the middle of Main Street...”

Martin gave her a sideways look.

“No, I wouldn't recommend it.” After thinking for a moment, he jokingly offered another solution. “You could tell the story of a woman who has a severe case of writer's block and begins a romance as a way of procrastinating about the story she's supposed to be working on.”

“Ha ha, very funny,” Jane retorted, but quickly tilted her head in contemplation and added, “On second thought, though, that's not a bad idea...”

Grabbing a scrap of paper and a pencil, she started scribbling away while Martin watched in bemusement. Presently she stopped and began to read aloud:

“The calendar taunted Helen, its little yellow-highlighted square outlined in a bold red stroke mocking her lack of progress.

“‘You're going to miss the deadline, you know. I'm just six weeks away now,’ it scoffed. ‘Whatever made you apply for that fellowship anyhow, and what could the panel have been thinking when they gave it to you? You're no writer; you've proven that over the past ten and half months.’...”

She looked up at him with a gleam in her eyes. “Would you mind taking care of the cleanup tonight? I've got work to do here.”

OVER THE FOLLOWING MONTH, Jane's smile never faded once; she suspected it was even present as she slept. It was one of those rare periods when everything went right: Her writing flowed, the story came together flawlessly, she not only met but beat her deadline, and — perhaps most significant in the smile department — she learned that Martin owned another home in a community neighboring hers, so their courtship could continue uninterrupted.

She was positively luminous as she sat in her favorite armchair following the award presentation, admiring the plaque she'd received earlier in the evening and petting the big dog whose head was resting on her silk evening dress.

“Renaissance in Writing Award, presented to Jane Barnett in recognition of excellence and innovation in creative writing,” she quoted. “Oh, Stormy, it was amazing. The ballroom was packed.

They called me up on stage and gave me this, and then introduced Tom Skerritt to do the live reading. Well, you know how I adore him, and he was wonderful! Hearing his interpretation gave me a different perspective and a new appreciation of the story. The audience hung on every word, laughed in all the right places — in case you don't know it, you're the straight man, the George to your cohort's Gracie — and 'awwed' when Helen and Jack got together.

"And then, they gave it a standing ovation. Everyone was applauding, even Cecilia Rogers, and let me tell you she's a tough nut to crack. I only hope she doesn't change her mind and pick it apart in her review in *The Times* tomorrow."

Although Martin would be arriving soon from his quick trip home to "get out of this penguin suit," Jane indulged herself another few moments of basking in her success before heading upstairs to change clothes. On her way back down, she paused at the doorway of her office, taking in the scene as though viewing a still life.

"You don't have much to say now, do you?" she stated finally. The calendar remained silent as she tore off the offending page, crumpled it into a ball and tossed it into the recycling bin.

When she answered the door seconds later, Martin deposited little Stormy on the floor and swept in exuberantly.

"Have you read the review?"

"No, I didn't think it would be out until tomorrow."

"The days of waiting for reviews are long gone, my dear! Allow me to edify you as to what the esteemed literary critic for *The Times* thinks of your story." Excitedly, he flipped the case of his iPad open and began reading:

"A gala banquet honoring Jane Barnett, winner of this year's Renaissance in Writing Award, was held earlier this evening.' And so on and so forth...here's the good part: 'Ms. Barnett's writing breaks with an ominous trend in modern fiction to focus on the existential, gloomy and lugubrious relationships that often seem to be the main subject of post-modern writers. Her voice is like a breath of fresh air, and it is obvious that she is fond of her characters. This fondness for her characters extends to a fondness for her readers, as she brings them along on an imaginative, funny, and endearing prose journey, thanks to her insight and understated power as a writer.' She gives it a rating of Highly Recommended."

"Wow..." Jane managed to utter after staring at him, mouth agape, for several seconds.

"There's that understated power as a writer," Martin teased, pulling her into an embrace. "I'd say this story has a happy ending, wouldn't you?"

"No," she replied, gently pushing away to look at him. "No, I wouldn't say that."

“You wouldn’t?” He looked stricken.

She smiled.

“I’d say this story doesn’t have an ending yet, and I hope it doesn’t for a long, long time.”

As they kissed, the Rottweiler lay down at their feet while the cat entwined herself among the three of them, purring her approval.

~ Not Really The End ~