

Writer's Pet

Keith sat straight in his chair, feet planted firm on the mat beneath the table in the window; hands poised above the greasy letters of his keyboard; eyes fixed on the empty page of symbols waiting for his instruction; and mind totally blank.

He had such a great story. A walk this morning from his holiday cottage through the neighbouring farmyard and fields had been his long awaited inspiration. An old barn with the remains of a tumbled-down cottage, its front door swinging and creaking in the wind, had enticed him in to its dusty cob-webbed interior and to the little upstairs room which looked as though it had been left in a hurry. An old coat hung on the door; a filthy cloth on a rickety table; torn curtains at the window ... a huge oak cupboard with a door drifting from its hinges ... What memories were there. His story broadened rapidly in his mind. The mystery he had lived with for months. It would begin here with childhood memories

The story had been with him, waking and sleeping, for many months, possibly years. Time passed so quickly. It seemed only yesterday, disillusioned by the goal-less routine of the tax office, he had first dreamed of the best-selling novel which was to make him a celebrity and a fortune, take him into new circles of friendship and restore a purpose to his life.

Greying hair, less acute hearing and aching joints told him time was becoming limited for the achievement of his ambition. He had to get on with it. So this fortnight in a remote country cottage was to be his turning point, a chance to walk, to reduce the excess weight of several winters, to lift a heaviness of mind as well as body, and to write.

Now, back in the cottage, in front of the lap-top, the first word would just not come Keith's hands rose from the keyboard to clutch his drooping head. *'What's the matter?'*

At first, with hands over his ears, Keith ignored the voice. There was no-one else in the room. He had shut the door and part closed the curtains to shield his eyes from the bright sunlight. Now the room was full of shadows.

The soft, comfortable, purring voice spoke again, *'What's the matter? Are you stuck?'*

Keith's head shot up now. Swinging round on his chair, he stared, rubbed his eyes and then stared again in disbelief.

'Am I dreaming?' he thought. *'I haven't taken any medication - no alcohol- not even a strong coffee!'*

What? How?' he spluttered, and the voice turned into a tremble of silent laughter rippling through fur.

Keith opened his mouth again, but no more words came. What do you say to an all black human-size cat lounging in an armchair, laughing at you through a characteristic feline grin?

The cat amply filled the chair, sitting in a relaxed person-mode, front paws resting on the chair arms, rear legs crossed with tail draped across them. The white tip of his all black tail twitched constantly when he spoke, like some giant antenna. Keith felt the piercing green eyes of his surprise companion staring at him, inviting him to speak. At last words came. *'Who? What did you say? You spoke!'*

'Of course I spoke.' His tone emphasised all the usual disdain cats have for humans. *'That's what you heard!'*

'I mean .. I mean ...' stuttered Keith. *'Aren't you supposed to miaow?'* Another disdainful look. *'Yes. That's how cats speak to each other, but humans don't speak cat. I'm talking human so you can understand, though I think my accent is still rather catty. You'd find it harder to speak real cat! I asked you what your problem is.'*

On later reflection Keith thought it incredible that he had so soon slipped into conversation with a cat as big as himself, drawn to it by the soft, strokey voice with a suspicion of miaow. *'Writer's block,'* he grunted. *'I've been struggling to get words on to this screen and the harder I try the deeper my mind blanks'* *'No such thing!'* purred the cat.

'As what?'

'As writer's block.'

'How do you know? You'll be telling me next you write historical cat novels in miaow!'

'No!' The cat jerked his head back and chuckled till his whiskers quivered. *'But I have managed a noisy night-time love story!'*

'Who are you?' Keith felt at ease enough to ask now. *'Are you real?'*

'Do I look like a ghost?' He rubbed his ear with his left paw. *'They call me the Writer's Pet. I'm a sort of service cat. I'm an un-blocker of blocked words. I wander from place to place with my lap-top, just finding people like you and giving them a push.'*

'How can use a lap-top?' It was practical minded Keith's turn to laugh now. *'Easy. Claws! I keep them sharp for the purpose. I can use my back feet too, which is more than you can. I work the space-bar with the tip of my tail. You can do anything if you try – even find words to write!'*

'But the words won't come!' Keith argued.

'That's just an excuse!' The scornful tone accentuated his miaow. *'Just put words down. They don't have to make sense!'*

'Tell that to a publisher! It's no help to me.'

The cat wriggled down in the chair, uncrossed and crossed his legs, and re-positioned his tail before he persisted. *'You don't clear a blockage by sitting down and looking at it, do you? You paw and poke around a bit. It's like some stupid cats who sit waiting for a mouse to walk by. If you're hungry you have to go out and sniff around, follow the scent, put your paw in the mouse-hole – work at it! If you were locked in this room you wouldn't sit down and wait for weeks. No, you'd break the window or force the door. If you want words you have to write them down and keep writing like runners going through the pain barrier'*. The cat paused and grinned. *'Go on do it!'*

'But the words won't be what I want to say!' protested Keith.

'How do you know? Go on. What word is in your mind now?'

'Cat!' said Keith.

'Well, write it down.'

Keith typed c, a, t' and the screen responded as reluctantly as the writer.

'Now put another word down.'

Keith typed *farmyard*.

'So,' purred the cat. *'Write 'the cat surveyed the farmyard'.'*

'Wait a minute,' said Keith. *'I've got an idea.'*

'I thought you would have.'

'My epic story of the farmyard cottage family. It could have a farm cat as a sort of logo; a mascot; a theme introducing memories at the beginning of each chapter...'

Keith's fingers were running fast across the keys now. Totally absorbed, his mind raced on and in thirty minutes the word counter at the bottom of the screen recorded one thousand nine hundred and three. He paused, looked up and turned to speak to the writer's pet ... He was alone. The cat had gone. Of course, he had been dreaming - but what a dream!. He got up from the table and crossed to the chair. On the back of the seat were black cat hairs - far too long for any ordinary sized feline A cold shiver ran the length of Keith's spine.

He felt he could take a break now without disturbing his flow of words. He needed to get outside. He needed the scene in the cottage room more deeply impressed on his mind. Closing the front door behind him and making sure it was secure, he surveyed the farm yard before taking another step. A disturbed hen squawking made him jump. *'Pull yourself together,'* he spoke out loud for reassurance. There was magic in the air!

Once inside the old cottage, Keith squeezed himself up the steep, narrow stairs and began to explore the room. It was as he had seen it earlier, but now he took in the details of the hanging coat and the pattern on the curtains, the loose floorboard and the inlay of the cupboard door. He pulled the door open, took a sharp breath, then dropped to his knees to stare at the shelf inside. There lay an old lap-top. The keys were badly scratched and across the space-bar was one long white cat hair!