

Presence of Mind
Or The Naked Writer
By
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The sails bowed as the wind drove the ship perilously close to the rocks. Marion smiled, envisioning the ship running aground, rocks ripping the hull apart. It would be fitting for her captors to end their lives in a watery grave. She struggled against the ropes binding her wrists behind her. Marion was a strong swimmer, but until she freed her arms, she couldn't swim any more than pigs could fly . . .

"Wait!" Pepper called. "Ranger needs to go."

Dulce turned. Her breath emerged in white puffs as she retraced her steps several yards to where Pepper stood waiting for her Golden Retriever.

"Do you think they used the expression, 'when pigs fly' in the eighteenth century?" Dulce asked.

"What?" Pepper bent to collect Ranger's droppings in a plastic bag.

"Never mind." Dulce reached up to brush her hair back, encountered her knit hat and let her hand drop. "It just doesn't sound right."

The two women and Ranger continued walking along the graveled trail. Dulce watched the water rushing over rocks and splashing between ice floes in the frozen river. She imagined ocean waves crashing on jagged rocks beneath a warm tropical sun. But there was no sun here today. Pepper's fuchsia fleece warm-up suit provided the only contrast to the incessant grey. As usual, Pepper looked like a model from the latest sportswear catalog. Even Ranger looked fashionable, with his brushed golden coat, electric blue collar and matching lead. Dulce, on the other hand, had thrown on layers of over-sized grey sweats and a navy stocking cap, when Pepper had called to remind her that it was time for their walk.

It wasn't Dulce's fault she was wearing her husband's sweats. She'd meant to finish the laundry yesterday, but she'd been working and lost track of the time. Between running the kids to swimming lessons and fixing dinner, the wet clothing had never made it out of the washer. What's worse, Marion hadn't escaped the pirate's ship.

Pepper interrupted Dulce's musings. "You haven't heard a word I've said, have you?"

"You were talking about picking the kids up from school."

"I was—five minutes ago. Just now, I was talking about Mr. Blanford's dog."

"Mr. Blanford has a dog?" Dulce couldn't imagine the neighborhood curmudgeon adopting a dog.

"I knew you weren't listening." Ranger paused to sniff and Pepper tugged at his leash to keep him moving forward. "You were off on that pirate ship again, weren't you?"

"I'm working on Marion's escape." Dulce waved a mittened hand to indicate the scope of the problem.

"Doesn't Britt save her? The hero has to save the fair damsel."

"His name is Bryce. And Marion is not a fair damsel." Dulce picked up a long stick and followed Pepper and Ranger onto a wooded side trail. "I mean, she is beautiful." Dulce sliced the stick through the air, then slashed at a low branch. "But she's also independent. She doesn't need rescuing."

Dulce thrust the stick into the belly of a bush, just as Pepper turned.

"Watch out for dueling pirates," she said, pulling Ranger back.

"You think I'm wacko, don't you?"

"Not wacko, exactly." Pepper smiled, shaking her head. "I think you're . . . creative."

"Is there a difference?"

Pepper flashed a grin. "There is no way I'm going to answer that." She turned and plunged ahead, following the short loop back to the main trail in silence.

Dulce tossed the stick into the river and watched it float away until the icy rocks caught it. "So, tell me about old man Blanford's dog," Dulce said.

"It's strange, isn't it?" They climbed the steps away from the trail and made their way back to the street. "He's always been so grumpy about dogs. I never imagined him as a dog owner."

They paused at a crosswalk. Several cars sped by before a city bus finally stopped allowing them to cross.

"Maybe he's lonely."

"Could be." Pepper shrugged. "In any case, he sure seems devoted. I see him walking that puppy up and down our street all day. With the river trail so close, it seems odd that he always stays on our block. Just walks up and down your side of the street most of the time."

Dulce wondered if it was possible to climb the rigging of a sail in an ankle length gown. She forced her mind back to Pepper's conversation--something about dogs. "Ranger?"

"No. Mr. Blanford's puppy." Pepper exhaled loudly. "Maybe I should pick the kids up today."

"Would you?"

"Sure. And I'll take them to the library so you'll have an extra hour."

"I owe you—big time. You're a true friend."

"Yeah, well. When you're in one of these moods I'm not sure you should be trusted to drive your own kids, let alone mine."

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In the darkness Dulce struggled to remove her nightgown and pull on her thick fleece robe. Her sleeping husband rolled over, then cleared his throat.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to wake you," she whispered.

"What time is it?"

"Six o'clock."

"Isn't it Saturday?"

"I have to write—"

"At this hour?"

She sighed. Married ten years and Ian still hadn't learned that Dulce worked best in the early morning. She pulled the belt of her robe tight. Ian switched on the bedside lamp and blinked up at her through his thick glasses.

He smiled at Dulce. "You're not wearing anything under that robe, are you?"

"You know writing in the nude frees my creative spirit and allows the story to soar." Dulce traced the path of a bird in flight with one hand.

"It's not fair. You always wear that flannel nightgown to bed."

"That's because you insist on sleeping with the window open. This room is like an icebox." Dulce walked around the bed, removed her husband's glasses and turned out the light. "Go back to sleep." She leaned down and kissed his forehead.

"Okay. But I think you should know. I'm jealous of your computer."

After checking on the sleeping children, Dulce walked downstairs. She passed through the kitchen and turned on the coffee maker, which she always readied before going to bed. Not wanting to take time for a real breakfast, she grabbed a Moon Pie from the cupboard.

Entering her office, she cranked up the space heater, switched on her computer and sat down. While the monitor came to life, she shrugged out of her robe, sensing her inhibitions falling away as the fabric fell from her shoulders. She closed her eyes and breathed deeply, imagining the smell of salt air, the sounds of gulls overhead . . .

Marion closed her eyes and inhaled slowly, absorbing the scent of the sea air and the warmth of the sun on her face. Captain Morgant had given her the run of the ship. Foolish man probably never imagined she could swim. She looked hopefully to the west.

"Now is your chance, my love," she whispered. "To prove that ship of yours is as swift as you brag."

Dulce smiled as the words took shape on the monitor, her fingers flying over the keyboard. She glanced out the large picture window, envisioning the mainsail of the ship instead of the bare maple tree in the front yard. Mr. Blanford crossed in front of the tree with his dog. Dulce wondered whether pirates might keep a dog or a cat on their ship.

By the time she paused to stretch her back and flex her wrists, the first rays of sunshine streamed across her desk. She rubbed her hands along the bare skin of her arms and shoulders, picturing Bryce's ship appearing as if by magic, out of the west with the sun shining behind it.

"Dulce—there's no coffee," her husband shouted from the kitchen.

"I started it when I came downstairs. It should be ready by now." Dulce resumed typing.

"You forgot to put the water in—again!"

"Water?" Dulce muttered.

Mr. Blanford walked his dog past the window again. Dulce started to wave, but he turned away when their eyes met.

"You know Ian," Dulce raised her voice to carry into the kitchen. "We should invite Mr. Blanford over some time. It must be hard for him living alone."

"Good idea." Ian shouted back. "Maybe next weekend?"

"What?"

"Next weekend. Dinner?"

"Yes. Wonderful idea." Dulce muttered, cutting the paragraph she'd just written. "Marion could escape while the pirates are busy with their dinner."

"Are you talking to me?" Ian asked as he entered the room.

"Hmm?" Dulce continued typing furiously.

"Here's your coffee." Ian set a mug on the desk next to his wife and placed a possessive hand over her bare shoulder.

"Thanks." She didn't look up.

"Moon Pies for breakfast again?" Ian tossed the empty wrapper into the trash can. "It's beyond me how you keep your trim figure. I look at one of those and gain ten pounds."

Dulce reached for her coffee. *Weight.* She pushed her hair back from her face. With all the layers of clothing Marion is wearing, she'd sink like a stone.

"Don't you close the curtain?" Ian asked, walking over to the window.

Dulce looked at him. "Did you say something?"

As Ian drew the curtains, hand over hand, Dulce saw Bryce raising the sail on his ship as he raced to intercept the pirates. He was shirtless, the muscles on his back rippling with each pull of his powerful arms. She took a sip of coffee. When Bryce's ship came close, Marion would have to get to him.

"Did you forget that you're naked?"

Naked. Dulce returned the cup to the desk, splashing coffee as she turned back to the keyboard.

Marion felt a bit wicked as she removed her gown, but she must be practical. Even the strongest swimmer could not traverse a hundred yards through ocean currents weighed down by layer upon layer of garments . . .

Dulce grinned as the end of the story played across her computer screen. Bryce and Marion together at last—forever. Sensing eyes focused on her, Dulce turned to see Ian undo the last button and toss his shirt over the recliner. He'd shaved and put his contacts in, but it wasn't his handsome face that caught Dulce's attention. Heat blasted through her as she stared at the solid chest and flat belly refined and shaped by her husband's three trips a week to the gym. He held a hand out to her. She swiveled around and clicked the little disc icon to save her document, then turned back to her husband.

He took her hand and pulled her bare chest against his, bending to kiss her throat. She clung to him—certain her knees would collapse if he let her go.

"Captain's quarters or deck, wench?"

"Hmm?"

"How does the story end?"

"What story?"

Ian swept her into his arms and kissed her until she had no more thoughts.