

The Writer

By Katherine Miller

Marty Castle was surprised when he stepped out of the seventh story window onto the ledge. He wasn't surprised at how far down it was. He had lived in 7B for nearly five years and was used to its vertigo. He knew this half-smogged view of the city. Marty wasn't surprised at how windy it was either. Well, maybe he was a little. He could hear the wind some nights, but he didn't expect it to tear at his shirt and pants the way it did. It was like a thousand tiny fingers trying to grab him from his ledge before he was ready.

What surprised Martin Castle was the woman sitting, two windows down, next to him on the ledge. He recognized her from next door. She seemed to be kind of strange. Marty had seen her in the hallway, on the

stairs, everyday for the past two weeks since she had moved in, but the two had never exchanged words. For a moment, he could believe she was crazier than he was and she would jump instead.

The woman sat quite solidly despite the narrowness of the ledge and the strength of the wind. Only her hair seemed to comply with the wind's fingers. She held in her hands, of all things in the world, a Bic Round-Stic and a battered clipboard. She seemed totally absorbed in writing on loose-leaf paper secured from the wind. She didn't notice Marty at all. If she did, she didn't show it.

At this point, curiosity got the better of Marty. He had intended to step out onto the ledge and immediately jump off. But suddenly, he was quite interested in why someone would pick this spot for writing. Besides, he was in no real hurry. Marty inched his way closer to the writer and tried to peer over her shoulder to see what she was writing. In the back of his mind, he could hear his mother griping at him, "Maaardy, it's not polite to read over someone else's shouldaaar."

"Oh, shut up, Ma," he muttered. She had been dead two years. He had never listened to her when she was alive, and he wasn't about to start now.

"What are you writing?" he asked. She ignored him. Actually, to ignore someone you had to notice them first. She still hadn't. What WAS she writing? Marty strained closer: being careful not to lose his balance. It was a list of some kind. A list of quotes.

Martin's eyes scanned the list looking, hoping something would make sense to him at this particular moment, while standing on a seventh story ledge, waiting to commit suicide:

*You know you've yo-yoed too much when your finger turns blue.

No, that definitely didn't apply.

*So many worlds, so much to do

So little done, such things be.

-Tennyson

*Always look on the bright side.

-Cliché

Those didn't fit either.

*Money can't buy happiness.

-Another Cliché

"Yeah, right," Marty muttered, "Have you ever tried it?" Nice sentiments, but they weren't going to work. Marty hated platitudes.

*Everyboby hurts.

-Michael Stipe

Now that one ticked Marty off.

"Who are you to assume my problems are like everyone else's?"

The writer didn't react. She didn't wince or even look up. She just kept on writing.

"Do you know why I'm up here? Do you know why I'm gonna jump?"

Of course, she didn't know. And she probably didn't even care for all her sympathetic axioms. She didn't care about all the tragedies that had befallen Martin Castle over the past month. Why would she? No one else did.

"But at least you're a captive audience," Marty smiled. At least the strange writer wouldn't run away or hang up on him like Steph had. "If you try to leave," he said in a mock threat, "I'll push you off." Marty laughed at his own joke, nearly laughed himself right off the ledge.

It all started when Martin's dog bit him. Actually, it wasn't his dog at all; it was Stephanie's. Stephanie had moved into Marty's New York apartment about two months ago. Since then, she had changed from the Steph that Marty used to know. She had become increasingly paranoid. She was from the Midwest originally; so, Marty figured she was just nervous about living in the "big city" for the first time. He learned quickly to tolerate Steph's compulsive paranoid habits. For example, locking doors and windows. She checked the windows and doors at least three or four times before going to bed each night or leaving for the day. And he didn't say anything when she replaced all the latches and locks with bigger latches and locks.

"Who was going to come in the seventh story window anyway?" said Marty as he contemplated how small the cars looked on the street below. Obviously, either Spiderman...or some psychotic writer.

Marty intended to draw the line when Steph suggested getting a dog. He might have made an exception if she had wanted a small dog like a Pomeranian or a Chihuahua. They could make enough noise to alert him to any danger. But Steph wanted a guard dog, which translated into a BIG dog.

Steph wanted a Rottweiler. A Rottweiler in his small, beautiful apartment. The apartment he'd had long before he met Steph. It was the first real apartment he'd had since he'd left college. If he wouldn't have found that apartment, he would have had to move back in with his mother (Maaardy, why don't you just come home...) His apartment... Martin Castle's castle...filled with his things, beautiful things, and expensive things...where a dog, a big dog just shouldn't be. But she didn't listen to his side of the arguments. She went out, behind his back, and bought a full-gown, fully-trained man-eater!

"Fully trained, my ass," Martin said into the wind. "That damn dog hated me from the beginning."

And the beginning of the end was the day the dog bit him.

Marty had come home from work at a quarter to five like he did every day. The only exception was Steph wasn't home as she usually was (where does a woman as paranoid as Steph go, alone, in New York?) and Marty

couldn't find his key to the newest top lock. It was a dead bolt type that required a key to be released. Marty thought he had changed all his keys, but, for all he knew, Steph has already replaced the second dead bolt with a third.

After trying all the keys he had, Marty needlessly rattled the knob and banged on the door. He was answered by barking from the hound from hell. Marty could visualize its slobbering jaws; its nails digging into his plush carpet. Suddenly, he heard something inside break. It sounded glass-like. Marty could just see the front of his stereo cabinet imploding against the weight of a dog body, or the crystal vase he'd bought Steph for her birthday shattering as it fell from the bumped end table. God, Marty hated that damn dog, as much as the dog hated him.

Marty made sure the rest of the locks were undone (there were only five of varying types, lined vertically at the jamb) and decided he was strong enough to overcome the dead bolt by kicking the door in. It would break the frame, but Marty wanted in before that damndog totaled his (HIS!) apartment. Marty used his best TV-cop form to give the door a strong flat-footed kick. He heard some splintering as a result of his efforts, but the door didn't open. The damndog seemed to increase the volume of his barking so that even Marty's heavy breathing couldn't drown it out.

Marty might have been okay if he would have made another kick at the door. He would have broken the frame, the door would have opened, and, chances are Marty would have been standing in the doorway. But that's not how it happened.

Marty shouldered the door instead. It gave way pretty easily. So easily, in fact, that it did not stop Marty at all. As the door opened, Marty kept going until he hit the floor. For a split second, he thought everything was going to be all right. He was lying on the floor just inside of a slightly broken doorframe, but, at least he was okay. A quick check confirmed that he hadn't physically damaged himself. Marty was about to pick himself up when the damndog barreled into him and sunk its slobbering jaws into Marty's upper arm. Marty was sure the next bite would be in his throat. That would be the end of it; the damndog would have successfully protected Marty's apartment from Marty. Luckily, (because the fates are kind even when they're plotting against you), Steph chose this moment to come home.

"Five seconds earlier, she could have unlocked the door for me," said Marty. "Five seconds later, she could have buried me."

A piece of paper tried to escape, but the writer's fingers snapped down on it before it flew away. Marty glanced at the last quote the writer had written:

*"Things are never as bad as they seem."

-Cliché

"Oh no? I ain't finished yet," said Marty.

Steph had been furious

"What did you DO?" she demanded.

Marty blinked.

"What DID you DO!"

It took him a few seconds to realize the question was directed at him and not the dog. It took a few seconds more to believe she was asking such a question while he was bleeding all over his plush carpet. In retrospect, Marty figured that's what finally pushed him over the edge. Not the broken door jamb. Not Steph ranting about having to spend the night somewhere else because the apartment was no longer secure. Not the vase which was

what had broken. Not the snarling dog. What really, REALLY upset Martin was the blood on his carpet.

"I said a lot of things I regret," Marty admitted to the wind and the writer. "She walked out and took the dog with her. That was about a month ago, and I haven't seen her since..." Marty could feel the lump that had plaguing his throat return. "I talked to her on the phone a few times; she called me from who knows where, probably back home in Iowa. She'd chew me out for harassing her dog, cry and mumble something about loosing all her security, and hang up..." Yes, he could definitely feel a sob forming. "She'd never let me explain... I tried to find her, but she's just nowhere..." He glanced over to the woman next to him on the ledge. Through slightly teary eyes, he noticed she'd written something new:

*A mad man makes a hundred
and love makes a thousand...

-Unknown

Marty nodded, not quite understanding the phrase, but it seemed to make some sort of sense for his situation.

"I met her when I was visiting my cousin in Iowa. It was love at first sight. Jeeze, she's just so beautiful. We look sooo good together." He was rambling, and he didn't even care. "How was I supposed to know she'd totally freak out in a big city? She said she wanted to stay there, but I told her we'd never end up seeing each other again if she didn't come back with me. I would go crazy in Iowa! It's just so far from everything I know..." Marty cried a little then. The woman he loved had left and his apartment was ruined.

"So what have I got to live for?"

There was no response from the writer. Marty looked down, moving a little closer to the edge, the wind gusted suddenly and pushed him back. Marty looked over at the writer again. This was her last chance. She had added two more to her list:

*Gravity is not just a good idea;

It's the law.

-Harry Anderson

*It's a long way down.

-Understatement

Marty looked down again. It was indeed a long way down. Did he really want to do this? He heard the writer's pen scratch another phrase.

*In the midst of chaos, make one definite act.

-Natalie Goldberg

A definite act, huh? Yes, he still had a choice, didn't he? He was still standing on the ledge and had not splattered on the ground. He could jump, or he could go back through his window and try to go on without Stephanie. It was a long way down, but what if seven stories wasn't enough to kill him? That would be his luck. He'd end up in a body cast for eight months. Or worse he'd land on his head and get brain damage. Besides, maybe the writer had a point earlier. Maybe things weren't as bad as he thought. He still had his apartment after all, such as it was. Marty had fixed the door the day after he'd broken it door, the vase didn't matter. The carpet was stained, but, hey, new carpet wasn't that expensive.

Marty looked down and, for the first time in about two and a half months, smiled. He knew what he had to do now. His life wasn't bad enough to warrant making a huge mess on the street below. He started to edge his way back toward his window, away from the strange woman who

still sat with clipboard and pen in hand staring out across the city. He was going to climb back through his window, eat dinner, and take a trip to Carpet Emporium. Marty was just about to step through his window when he felt a hand grab his ankle.

"HEY!" He managed to turn slightly before totally losing his balance. The writer let go of his ankle before Martin Castle's momentum took her with him. He never saw the last quote she had written:

*Make your decisions quickly or they will be made for you.

-The Writer

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