



Nancy Drew and The Case of Writer's Block

“Nancy Drew, you look as if you had a date,” Hanna Gruen exclaimed, “but it’s only two in the afternoon! Is everything all right? You haven’t been yourself lately.”

Hannah, the Drews’ beloved housekeeper, was right. The afternoon sun was just beginning to slant through the windows of the lovely Drew home, but Nancy wore a ravishing floral print dress patterned in the Japanese style with bold colors and modern-looking designs. This set off her black flats and pearl bracelet to advantage. The slim, titian-haired daughter of famous lawyer

Carson Drew always dressed well, but even she had to admit that she usually saved her best outfits for outside the home.

Nancy had only been on two dates since her ex-boyfriend, Ned Nickerson, turned out to be a Saudi spy – and a homo – in *The Secret of the Suicide Bomber* four years earlier. One of those dates had died before he'd even paid for dinner in *The Mad Cow Epidemic*. She couldn't blame Hannah for thinking that even a former teen-detective of the likes of Nancy Drew might get nervous after all that. Nancy herself found the idea ridiculous. Mystery could give her chills, but not boys.

“Oh, Hannah, I just thought – ” Nancy hesitated. She didn't like to keep things from her dear Hannah, but she knew how much she fretted. “You've got me. I do have a date, but it's not till later.” She explained that she was nervous and would be trying on dresses all afternoon. The white lie gave her a good cover to spend most of the afternoon by herself, writing. If things went well, she could take her portable computer to a café in downtown River Heights when it was time for her “date.”

“When is George coming over?” Hannah asked.

“Oh, Hannah, George hasn't lived in River Heights for years. She and Bess had a civil union in Massachusetts when they discovered that they weren't really cousins. You were there, don't you remember?” The ceremony had been beautiful.

“I'll keep the cake in the Frigidaire then,” Hannah said.

As the housekeeper shuffled to the kitchen, Nancy worried that Hannah's Alzheimer's was getting worse. She couldn't rule out poisoning, so she made a mental note to question the new Mexican gardener. It was commonly known that aluminum caused Alzheimer's, and she'd noticed that his new rake had an aluminum handle.

It was time for her to start writing. Hannah would understand when Nancy's next story was published. She would see how much better it was than the others and understand why Nancy had been acting strangely. Until then, Nancy had decided to keep her writing habits to herself. Even her father might think she was crazy if he knew that she dressed up to write stories! How could she explain that she had writer's block and every little thing helped?

Nancy Drew let herself into her father's study with her personal copy of his key. He was away in Cleveland on an important case. He had been in Cleveland since 1986.

The study was a beautiful room with bookcases lining the walls, filled with leather-bound books. Nancy sat at her father's big desk and took her portable computer from a handbag which matched her dress. She decided to check her electronic mail before returning to her newest story, *The Ghostly Term Paper*. She knew that many great authors had gotten lots of their ideas from correspondence. She had two new messages that did not mention V/1agra.

The first one was from her friend Jimmy Olsen, who

worked at The Daily Planet in Metropolis. It was his idea that she start writing stories after she had helped him solve *The Mystery of the Kryptonite Catheter*. Almost six months had passed since he'd asked her for material, but it hadn't gotten any easier for Nancy. Jimmy was always so courteous and charming, but Nancy could barely recognize her own stories after Jimmy and his editors had gotten their dickbeaters on them. Of course it was their job to change what other people wrote, but Nancy hated playing second fiddle.

Dear Nancy, the electronic mail read, thank you for your most recent message. Willikers! If your new story is as exciting as you make it sound, I think we can wait for it! I'm sad to give up on your other story, The Case of the Case of Möet. Don't worry about my editors, they're full of baloney. They're just moving words around, not saying that they are better at solving mysteries than you. When readers see your name in the Daily Planet Weekend Arts Supplement (editor in chief J. Olsen!), they know that they're hearing from one of the greatest former teen-detectives ever. (Certainly the most stylish!) No one will care that you've gotten a little help in smoothing out your stories.

Speaking of smoothing things out, even though we won't be using The Case of the Case of Möet, I've gotta apologize for confusing you. When I recommended that you imagine that you're reporting the case to a police chief when you write, I should have said that was only a suggestion. Readers may find it awkward

if every line starts with “And then I thought that.” No biggie, though. You just keep writing, Miss Drew, and we’ll keep printing it. Just don’t worry too much if some of my boys want to get a hand in it too.

Yours truly,

Jimmy Olsen

Editor in Chief, Daily Planet Weekend Arts Supplement

Ps. I’ve had my buddy Clark mail you a copy of a book by two swell guys named Strunk and White that a lot of us at The Planet like to keep handy.

Thinking of her last story, *The Case of the Case of Möet*, Nancy was reminded of the bottles of single malt whisky that her father kept in his study in honor of their Scottish heritage. Pouring herself a glass from the cut-crystal decanter, Nancy said to herself that it was never too early in the day to honor your heritage, especially if you were dressed well.

The expensive liquid glistened in the sun as Nancy sipped it and read her next message. It was from her good friend Barbara Gordon.

Nancy sat up straight and had some more of the Scotch.

My Dearest Nancy,

I'm sorry for not writing sooner, but I've been terribly busy. Do you remember when I said that I was writing my memoirs? Well, they've been published and I'll be in River Heights for a reading tonight. The reading is at Carter's Books at 6:30 and I'd love it if you'd come. We can have coffee afterwards.

Yours truly,

/Barbara

Nancy read the message again and felt confused. Even though Barbara and Nancy never spent much time together, they had corresponded since the 1970s when they had met on a crowded train that was being hijacked. They often felt as if no one else understood what it took to solve so many crimes and still look so good. So of course she was excited to see Barbara.

She also felt that it was unfair that Barbara, being so busy anyway, had managed to write a whole book while Nancy was still struggling to write a few good stories. On the other hand, that made Barbara the perfect person to talk to about her troubles. But why did she have to sign her name like that – was it supposed to look like a bat?

Nancy had read about how sometimes when writing a story it was important to give the characters what was called “conflict.” Maybe that was what she was feeling. Whatever it was, she didn't feel like herself. What kind of person wouldn't be happy to hear that a

friend had published a book?

Nancy had a little more Scotch. It made everything in the house seem a little more interesting, but not so in her head. She couldn't bear to read *The Case of the Case of Möet*, and *The Ghostly Term Paper* didn't seem any better. She went to the kitchen to cook a crackling roast.

When the roast was done, she decided to take a walk around the grounds. She ran into the Mexican gardener. There were a few scratches in the handle of his rake where he could have shaved off some metal. She would have to keep an eye on him. He said he didn't speak English, but Nancy suspected that this could be a ruse.

Back in the house she found Hannah taking a nap. Nancy set a book on the top of the door so that no one could enter without waking Hannah. If no one tried, Hannah would understand that Nancy had her safety in mind when she saw the book.

It was time to leave for the reading. Nancy checked her blue roadster for booby-traps and car-bombs, and soon was on the road to downtown River Heights.

A little ways down the road she noticed some lights. A police cruiser was parked beside a roadblock just before a blind turn. Nancy pulled her blue roaster to the side of the road and got out. She recognized the policeman on duty as one of the few River Heights officers who hadn't tried to get into her pants.

"Hello, Officer McBride, what's the trouble?" Nancy said.

“Oh hello Ms. Drew. A truck lost control and ended up in the ravine, but now the injured driver’s trapped. We’d go down and get him ourselves, but a mountain lion’s been attracted to the blood. We’ve managed to hold it off, but we’re waiting for animal control to arrive.”

Nancy knew that the mountain lions that lived near River Heights were endangered, so the officers couldn’t shoot it. She also knew that, like the common domesticated dog, mountain lions could hear frequencies that humans couldn’t. Explaining this to Officer McBride, Nancy said, “And I just happen to have a dog whistle in my car, left there after I revealed *The Imposter Grand Champion Bichon Frisé*.”

Nancy got the dog whistle from the glove compartment of her roadster. With the help of Officer McBride, she climbed as far down the ravine as was safe and blew on the whistle with all her might. The mountain lion had been crouched in a tree, watching the trapped driver. At the sound of the whistle, it bared its fangs at Nancy but shrank back as if in pain. Nancy blew harder, and the mountain lion ran away into the woods beyond the ravine.

“Thanks a lot, Nancy Drew,” said Officer McBride as he moved the roadblock aside to let her pass. Nancy waved as she continued on the road to downtown River Heights.

The reading was lovely. Barbara was witty and well-spoken. Afterwards she and Nancy caught up in the Starbucks next-door. Barbara had a venti frappuccino

and Nancy had a black coffee which she decided to make a bit more Scottish.

“It’s so nice to see you, Barbara,” said Nancy. “The wheelchair hasn’t changed you one bit.”

Barbara smiled graciously. She looked so much older than Nancy. True, the years had been kind to both of them, but Barbara didn’t seem to remember the 1950’s like Nancy did. Yet Nancy didn’t look a day past twenty-two while Barbara looked nearly *thirty*. When Barbara commented on this, Nancy suggested that life in River Heights must be less taxing than in Gotham. “Beside the occasional disappearance or car crash,” Nancy said, off-handedly.

“Or haunting,” Barbara added.

“Yes. A few poisonings here and there, but nothing exciting.”

“Robberies, too.”

“True. A little terrorism.”

“Any blackmail?”

“A bit. About as often as we have a fire.”

“Any invasions?”

“Not really.”

“Must be nice,” Barbara said, sipping her frappuccino.

Nancy said it was and looked out the window, smiling at placid downtown River Heights. “Oh, Barbara, look, that’s Hector Marshall.”

“The man with the heavysset brow and strange limp?”

“That’s the one. He should be in the country jail for embezzlement.”

“Do you see the slight bit of orange showing between his shirt and trousers, indicating his convict’s uniform?”

“Mm-hmm,” Nancy said, sipping her coffee.

Barbara saw Nancy hesitate. “Is this something you need to take care of?”

Nancy sighed. “Probably.” She turned back to her friend and brushed a lock of her titian hair out of her face. “But this is so nice, Barbara.”

“I agree, I rarely ever get to just sit and talk with someone who can understand me. Don’t worry, I’ll call some friends.” Barbara took out a sleek black compact which transformed into a secret-frequency communicator. She gave Hector’s details and coordinates, inquired to the health of the person on the other end, and snapped the device shut. “Where were we?” she asked, beaming at her friend as if she were the most important person in the world. Nancy loved the attention, but she also noted how Barbara achieved this effect so she too could do it someday on her own book tour. Psychologists have proven the importance of eye contact.

Nancy sighed. “I think I was trying to admit that I was bored by blaming it on River Heights.”

Barbara looked shocked. “Nancy Drew, this isn’t like you!”

Nancy sighed again and drew closer to Barbara. “I know. It’s absolutely silly of me. River Heights is wonderful, and I have so many hobbies to keep me busy. It’s just that...” And here she stopped, as if she was hiding something.

“What is it, Nancy? I can tell you’re hiding something. Has Ned come back?”

“No, he’s much more interested in tormenting Agent Mulder now, if you know what I mean. It’s not that – it’s just, well, I feel silly complaining to you about this.”

“Whatever do you mean, Nancy?”

“Well, see, you’ve written a whole book, and, well, I think I have writer’s block. And it’s terrible.”

“Writer’s block! But Nancy, you’ve had two stories in the Daily Planet’s Weekend Arts Supplement in the last six months! That’s very good.”

“I know, I know. But something’s not right,” she confided in her friend. Nancy told her everything, about the editors, her suspicion that Jimmy just wanted her name in the paper, her failed strategies at writing something readable, and even about her Scottish heritage.

“That’s so strange. I’ve always found whisky to be an excellent cure for writer’s block,” Barbara said. “All the leading research confirms it.”

“I know, I know,” said Nancy. She stared out the window.

“Oh, there’s Hector,” Barbara said, pointing across the street. They watched as two women in costumes subdued him with roundhouse kicks and tied him up with cables.

“Thanks,” Nancy said.

“No problem,” Barbara answered while pushing some illuminated buttons in the arm of her high-tech wheelchair. “Well, what’s the matter, then? You have

plenty to write about. If you must write fiction, just tell one of your own stories and change the names.”

“I tried that. For one, the names confused me, but it just didn’t seem interesting. I guess if you’ve never been in a car chase before you might get excited if you read about one, but I certainly don’t. It’s hard to write something you don’t enjoy,” Nancy said. She wanted to add that it was just hard to write, but she didn’t.

Barbara nodded. “So what do you enjoy writing about?”

Nancy disturbed her pretty face for a moment by creasing her elegant brow. “I don’t know. I enjoy *doing* so many things, but they seem so boring when I write about them.”

Barbara nodded. “Have you tried adding *more* action?”

“Well, by the time I add enough mystery and intrigue to make it realistic, it gets boring again. If I add too much more, it seems silly.”

Barbara nodded. “Well, Nancy, some people have a lot more martial arts in their life.”

“Yes, I thought about that. I’m very good at research, as you know, so I could make it accurate even though I don’t practice myself. But it just seems... kind of fake.”

Barbara nodded. “I understand. I was lucky when I was writing my memoir because I’ve lived such an interesting life. Even so, I discovered that just writing down everything that happened wasn’t always good enough. My injury, for example, was very frustrating to write about. Every account of the details seemed

to be missing something. It certainly helps that Batgirl is a strong brand, but nowadays people won't read a whole book on name-recognition alone." Barbara enjoyed a sip of her frappuccino. "Of course, I had a wonderful ghost-writer to help me through the sticky bits."

Nancy was shocked. "Really?" A ghost-writer?

"Oh, of course. Sometimes you need to work as part of a team. All the big names use one. Remember Tintin's autobiography?"

"Oh, goodness, yes. It was terrible, but so many people bought it." If she were someone else, Nancy Drew would have suspected herself of jealousy at that moment.

Barbara arched an eyebrow and said that maybe one word in ten was his own. Nancy gasped. "He's too busy doing coke with the Potter brat, anyway," Barbara said, not bothering to hide her disapproval.

"Really?"

"Oh, yeah. A record snowfall between the two. They frequent the gay district of Gotham."

"Really?" Sometimes it seemed to Nancy like the world was drowning in queers.

"That's what they say. Haven't seen them myself."

Here the conversation turned to good-natured gossip. They picked apart the scandals of the girls who had most recently called themselves "Batgirl." Nancy called them gangly, no-talent whores, and Barbara thanked her for that. They talked admiringly of Frank and Joe's ability to stay out of the media, though Nancy thought she detected something unusual in

Barbara's regret that Joe still hadn't gotten over Iola's death. Whatever it was, it disappeared as soon as she convinced Barbara to spill the beans on the rumors about her and Mr. Bond. Nancy's own fling with the Quest boy seemed tame by comparison, despite having taken place in a doomed deep-sea research station. The evening passed quickly, as evenings often do in the company of a stimulating friend.

Nancy checked the book on Hannah's door when she got home. It was undisturbed, so Nancy could conclude that no one had tried to poison her. As she took it down, it occurred to her that it was full of words that someone had written. She weighed it in her hand as she took it back to the study. It was one of her father's law books. Somehow the idea of writing down laws and explaining them seemed so much easier than writing a story. Nancy sat in the darkened room and considered writing a guide to sleuthing. Even though it had been a full day, Nancy felt disappointed that she hadn't written anything. What was behind these mysterious feelings? Why did writing down her thoughts seem so difficult yet so important?

Nancy was determined to find out. She finished her whisky and went to bed. There was no sense in tackling a mystery without getting a good night's sleep.

Just like many famous authors, Nancy spent most of the next day in bed. Conveniently, so did Hannah, so no one bothered her. Some time after noon, she saw

Officer McBride's police cruiser pull up the winding driveway of the Drews' handsome brick home, surrounded by a velvety green lawn. At first she was hopeful of a new mystery to occupy her thoughts, but she saw through the crack in the blinds that he was wearing his dress uniform. It was neatly pressed, and he had put a small rose through the top button. As the bell rang, she concluded that at least he wasn't a homo but not that it was worth getting out of bed to answer the door.

She wished she smoked, like Dostoyevsky or Raymond Chandler. How did so many authors make a listless day in bed seem so profound – or at least interesting? Nancy was bored out of her mind, yet she still didn't want to get up. She made a hopeful note on the pad she kept on her nightstand for just such circumstances, saying that she might possibly have what the French called "*ennui*."

She tried, briefly, to capture the new significance that the footboard of her bed seemed to acquire under the weight of her hangover, in the pale morning light. The effort, however, put her right to sleep and she woke with ink on her hands. It made her feel more like a writer, but not like a good one.

Nancy left her room around suppertime, wearing only a pink chiffon nightgown and her favorite Prada slippers. She'd hoped that Hannah had left her some lunch – perhaps a potato salad – but instead only found two apples and an old slingshot beside an illegible note on the kitchen counter. Taking one of the apples, Nancy found Hannah asleep in front of the

small television she kept in her room. Nancy covered her in a blanket and placed a book on the door, just in case.

She entered her father's study, but this time without her portable computer. Nancy stood in the quiet room, enjoying the evening light as it streamed through the colorful stained glass windows. When she was done, she went through the folding doors behind the desk to get some air on the widow's walk .

Nancy felt the cool evening air on her skin through her nightgown and looked out on River Heights as the sun approached the horizon. She ate her apple and thought about her feelings.

Before she caught it, Nancy thought of writer's block as an affliction perhaps worse than the vapors but far less serious than the chills. Now that she suffered from it, she wished that it were fatal. Between the title of her new story and its second paragraph, Nancy had baked two apple turnovers, four dozen cookies, a fruitcake, two loaves of bundt cake, that crackling roast, and a quiche – but that was for the postman who looked so tired and hungry the day before, so she couldn't blame herself.

As she chewed her apple and considered this evidence, she developed a strange notion. Was it possible, as it now seemed, that she was bad at being bad at something? She couldn't remember the last time she had failed so profoundly at something. In fact, Nancy could not remember the last time she had failed at anything at all. Despite this, she knew that even

without natural talent a girl could achieve anything through a combination of hard work, persistence, and spirit. A good wardrobe and helpful friends never hurt, but those were the basics.

There had been mysteries that took longer to solve than others, and she had sure gotten herself into a few bad scrapes. But those always worked out somehow if she kept her wits about her and tried hard. Never in her life had she procrastinated or avoided something. Thinking then about all the time she had lately been spending cooking, investigating the gardener, driving back roads in her blue roadster, or catching jewel thieves, Nancy got the creepy feeling that things that she was not aware of were happening in her head. It was a ridiculous notion, but she couldn't shake it.

Then there was the worrying. She didn't worry so much when she kept busy, but the fretting would always catch up with her. Something would remind her of her stories, and it would all start again. Because she had started worrying about writing, which was something she couldn't solve yet, she began to worry about worrying. The writing itself wasn't the hard part. Well, it was, but the worrying made it so much harder and seemed like it was an even bigger problem itself.

She remembered this kind of thing happening to some of the girls from school who weren't very pretty. Back in high school, girls worried about grades, about boys, about their clothes. Something little went wrong – a broken shoelace or a poisoning or something – and then it was all wailing and gnashing of teeth forever-

more with them. You couldn't just fix the shoelace or put the drifter away for life – the worry had already gotten into them and it all went downhill from there. They worried and thought only of themselves. Then they got into trouble, and Nancy would have to either save them or hand them over to the police. Either that or they wasted away in the library. There was no style in that kind of worrying.

When Nancy used to worry, she'd worry about getting out of a burning barn in time or if the robbers knew where she was hiding. That kind of thing couldn't last more than a couple minutes before you either did something about it or you died. She wasn't used to worrying about things that couldn't kill her. It was becoming a habit, and this worried her.

Once Nancy convinced Hannah that she could still cook and clean all she wanted, the Drews' beloved housekeeper was keen to start her new life in the managed-care facility. Nancy sat to listen to Hannah complement the drapes for an hour. Then she said goodbye and left.

Instead of turning west to River Heights, Nancy put up the roof of her blue roadster and pointed it east. She had packed some bread and cheese, an apple, and the last of her Scottish heritage in a basket. She was wearing a smart black dress, a cinnabar necklace with a gold clasp, and sensible black flats. She chewed a lock of her titian hair while she drove. She'd

gotten Officer McBride to watch the house. He was happy to do it. Also he was not enough of a detective to find her underwear.

Nancy was naturally gifted at engine repair, so her roadster was in perfect running condition. After eighty miles, she let out a deep breath. She hadn't enjoyed the machine for what it was worth in a long time.

Nancy knew she would be thirty one day, but she'd still discovered the garbage man's nasty secret, hadn't she? She saw no reason to settle down or become one of those terrible neighbors who'd rather close the drapes than disturb their own peace of mind. What kind of peace could that be, anyway, always worrying about whether or not to close the drapes or peer out from them just a minute more?

To tell the truth, Nancy found it more difficult to tolerate most people with each passing year. George and Bess were sweet as ever and still came through when Nancy needed them, but they couldn't stop talking about adoption. No one's going to rappel into a mineshaft to loosen the rock of a cave-in if they've got a baby on their back and a PTO meeting to get to.

She couldn't be sure if she began feeling this way after she'd begun this silly try at writing stories or if that was what got her started in the first place. Sometimes she felt like worry was all writing was: Will anyone believe that? Is that what she means? Do gypsies throw knives the same way that carnival men do? And then here she was, driving without anywhere to go, worrying about it more without being any closer

to writing a word. It seemed like such a waste of time, but she couldn't give up. Of course, she never gave up on anything, but she also really *wanted* to write. The world was getting stupider as she got older, and someone had to set things straight.

She was halfway through Ohio by sundown. She stayed at a motel with a mysterious, one-armed night porter, but she didn't investigate. She got up early, but was delayed when she got going in her journal. It felt good to write for that long, even if it wasn't interesting. She'd visit her father on the way back, whenever that would be.

The sun began to set in her rearview mirror as she left Pennsylvania, so Nancy put on her good tortoiseshell sunglasses. A smile from behind their big dark lenses was enough to get her through the first tollbooth on the New Jersey turnpike. She drove as the sky darkened.

Even Frank and Joe were settling down. Nancy rarely visited now that Callie had stopped pretending to like her, and Joe wasn't up for traveling quite yet. She wished that Modesty and Willie were in New York again. Nancy felt like she might be able to drink them under the table for once. Barbara was in Minneapolis for her tour, and Nancy had just seen her, besides. And that was the end of the list of people she wanted to see. The lights of all the car dealerships, waterbed wholesalers, and Chinese buffets swept over her car without ever seeming to end. Nancy got a small, weird thrill from imagining that they were full of the fattest,

most boring people in the world.

She still hadn't decided if she was going to stop in New York or Gotham when she saw a sign for Sleepy-side-on-Hudson. She was still two hundred miles away, but the distance seemed to disappear beneath the wheels of her perfect blue roadster in no time. The town seemed abandoned when she arrived, lit only by a few lampposts on Main Street. Nancy had always meant to visit, but she never seemed to have a spare minute. She used her palmtop computer to find directions to where she was going.

It was a small, private graveyard up on a hill looking out on the Hudson, sheltered by old oak trees. The night air was much colder than Nancy expected when she first stepped out of the car, and the stillness and quiet made her feel a little dizzy after so much driving. She got her trusty flashlight from the glove compartment and climbed over the old iron fence around the cemetery. She found Trixie Belden's grave in the corner with the best view.

Nancy shone the flashlight's yellow beam on the pretty rose granite headstone. It was short and stocky just like Trixie had been. Poor Trixie. Drowning was supposed to be horrible.

The wind was picking up, and Nancy was beginning to get cold. She didn't want to go quite yet. A distant police siren interrupted her thoughts.