

MY LUCKY DAY

By Patrick LoBrutto

About a million years ago, back before the Punic Wars (well, okay, it was 1974), I met, in a stroke of great good luck, Dwight V. Swain.

I had been working at Ace Books since 1969, when I was a graduate student studying Urban Planning. I'd started out in the mailroom and by 1974 was the Science Fiction Editor, mainly because I had tons of enthusiasm and had read a lot of Science Fiction... and was a dumb kid who was so excited to be working on books that I would work for just about nothing.

The world was newer then, and different than it is now. Legendary figures, authors and editors walked among us; they sat next to us on the subway, worked down the hall and conversed with us by the water cooler. Okay, maybe it wasn't so completely magical, maybe I was just an impressionable boy, head full of bumblebees and stars... and words, beautiful words. Ace was a heady atmosphere for a kid from Brooklyn -- especially one who loved books so much.

My father had taught me to read before I went to nursery school; he'd sat me on his lap and read the Classic Comic Books of The Iliad and The Odyssey moving his fingers under the words; and the words were like a river moving through me. I couldn't get enough. And, brother, was I ever in the right place. There were over 7000 books in my parents' house: popular fiction and non-fiction, Greek and Roman classics, beautifully bound volumes from the 19th Century, complete sets of Shakespeare and Dickens and Thomas Wolfe and Mark Twain and Edgar Allan Poe and so much more. The volumes filled whole rooms and I was in high school before I had to go to the library to do research. When I wasn't outside playing stickball and street football, I was reading. I loved rainy days because then I could spread my arms like a high diver, just tip myself forward and fall into the stories and words that filled me with emotion and incident, with new and exotic people and places.

I believed then, and perhaps even now, that books were magic, and alive; I believed that a book slept, fitfully, when closed and came awake when opened. Years later, I had the wonderful good fortune to work with the award-winning author, Jack Dann, who believed the exact same thing when he was a boy.

But I never thought it was possible for me to become a writer.

Oh, I'd written lots of funny letters and had a story published in my high school literary magazine... and I was the author of the absolute worst poetry of all time. But somehow, it never really crossed my mind to sit down and write. And then I'd begun work at Ace Books -- a successful publisher of Romance, Gothic, Western, Mystery and Science Fiction. When I discovered that there were people who would pay me to read and work on books (even if they were only prepared to pay a very little money) I gave up Urban Planning. I was so filled with the wonderfulness of the idea of being an editor that it opened me up to beginning to consider that I could maybe think about wanting to write a story.

I had a fine time editing Science Fiction and immersing myself in its odd, fascinating culture. It was stimulating and imaginative and it opened up whole new universes for me. After several years, I found it satisfying and fulfilling work but it wasn't long before I knew in my heart that I really wanted to be a writer, that I wanted so desperately to

extend the world beyond myself. And that was when I knew real fear: what if I was a lousy writer? What if I failed and made a fool out of myself? And from down there, deep in the folds where the right brain, the left brain and the devil meet came the whispered answer: Why desire something so dangerous? And who cares what you have to say? Pick another dream--one that's safer and less painful.

Perhaps I might have done so, maybe I would have listened to that voice that so hates wonder, that so fears joy. Or perhaps I would have been able to gather my courage up and begin the arduous work of exposing my dreams and thoughts... I remember being very much on the cusp of fear and desire. I suppose I could have gone either way if I had to make the choice on my own.

But that's when Dwight Swain walked in the door. He was in NYC and had come up to the office because he needed a copy of one of his Science Fiction novels Ace had published a few years before.

Dwight was still pretty vigorous back then, and had the friendliest, most contagious smile you ever saw. He was the author of countless stories, articles, film scripts and books; he made his living teaching and writing and editing. He was fascinating and friendly and fun and he was a big-time professional writer; in about 10 minutes we were talking as if we'd been friends and compatriots for decades. Too few years later, Dwight would contract emphysema and arthritis and other ailments, but none of this would ever dim his enthusiasm and curiosity -- in fact, in the latter part of his life when he was sick and shaped like a pear and you would feel so sorry for him you'd help him across the street, he'd appear in photos in the middle of the Nicaraguan jungle interviewing the head of the Sandanista rebels, or on the slopes of Mount Everest, getting the goods from a Sherpa guide. Just how'n'heck did he do that you'd ask, but Dwight would only chuckle.

Dwight was always full the most wonderful conversation. He had a head full of projects and ideas, and was always willing to share and discuss them. His house was a wonder -- there were piles of books and magazines and papers covering the floors everywhere so that there were only pathways between them that led to rooms....

But I didn't know any of that in October of 1974 when I first met him. I found myself telling him immediately about my dreams and fears; his happy, boisterous sincerity urged me to be honest. He grasped my hands, "You must always pursue your dreams, even if it frightens you. That's the only way you'll ever be happy. If you don't, you'll be miserable, believe me. Besides, you'll be a wonderful writer. I just know it." Of course he knew what had to be done straight away. He bundled me into my suit jacket and with a torrent of words, hustled me out of the office, into an elevator and out onto Sixth Avenue and uptown to a bookstore in Rockefeller Center a few blocks away. In a moment he was pulling a book from the shelf, *Techniques of the Selling Writer* by Dwight V. Swain. He paid for it, wrote on the title page and handed it to me. "Here. This is for you. Read it and get to work."

We said our goodbyes, and as I watched him disappear into the autumn crowd, I read his inscription. For the day you write books instead of editing them. I was a scared, dumb, punk pisher and he was Dwight V. Swain and he had so much confidence in me that he bought me a copy of his own book on the craft of writing. That was a real changing point in my life; it spurred the liberation of my own confidence and the issue has never been seriously in doubt since.

Dwight and I kept in touch -- he never failed to encourage and praise -- as time went by,

and he was as good and interesting a man as any I've ever known. He never let me forget that I was responsible for making my dreams come true; he never allowed me to forget that I had a wonderful, worthwhile dream. He showed me that I had to teach myself about confidence and courage. Every day, he once told me, there's a surprise quiz and that's what you should be writing. He was right about that, too.

A boatload of years have passed, I've had stories and articles published (but not a single poem -- though I never stopped writing them). Many times, I've doubted myself and wondered if I had the talent and the discipline; I've even turned from writing to other things for a time. But I couldn't stay away for long. Even if I could, Dwight would have been there, like Jiminy Cricket or a guardian angel, reminding me.