

The Perfect Busman's Holiday

[By Holly Lisle](#)

I've been writing books under contract since 1991 – a happy state for me that has primarily meant I've known I had some money due when my book was finished. For a long time, I didn't see any real downside to writing under contract. I was writing my own stories, after all – my own worlds, my own characters, my own plots. Even when I did collaborations or work-for-hire, I was fortunate to be working in worlds or areas of worlds that I took a large role in designing, writing with characters that I either created myself or with my collaborator. I never got stuck writing characters that someone else controlled.

So I felt free, in command of my own destiny, comfortable with my writing and the state of my life. There were times when I was writing four books in a single year just to keep my head above water financially, but I was okay with that. I figured I was paying dues, and I kept going. I developed a big solo project – a trilogy that went to a respected publisher for respectable money, that got me my first solo foreign resales, and that allowed me to slow down to one book in nine months. These were bigger books, much more complex than anything I'd previously written, so we're not talking vacation here, but I wasn't having to pull fourteen-hour days to hit my deadlines either, so I was right with the world.

Through the first book, anyway.

Then I started hitting brick walls. I'd never had what I would call writer's block, though I had suffered the occasional stall-and-tailspin when I went off in the wrong direction on a book. I always managed to pull out by backing up to the last point where the writing was going well, cutting out everything I'd written from that point (and pasting it into a separate document) and picking up from my trouble spot in a new

direction.

But in Book Two of the Secret Texts (**Vengeance of Dragons**) I started losing whole days, and even whole weeks, to endless sessions of solitaire while I tried to figure out what to write next. It wasn't that I didn't know what I wanted to have happen; I knew. The story was clear in my head, I knew the characters, I knew the twists. It wasn't that I'd gone off in the wrong direction – what I had was good, and I knew it. It was, instead, that I had given myself over to the effects of a painful malaise. When I sat in front of the keyboard, my fingers felt like lead and my mind moved like sludge.

I was tired and I knew it. I'd been working damned hard for years, and it was catching up on me. I needed a vacation away from tight deadlines and large numbers of necessary pages-per-day – I needed a few worry-free months on a beach, doing nothing but reading great novels by other people. Unfortunately, as I've mentioned elsewhere, writing is my sole source of income. If I want to eat, I have to write, and those pages have to be done on time, and done in a manner acceptable to my editor and my publisher.

So I made it through **Vengeance of Dragons** on pure nerves and good outlining – there were places where the story did the work for me, and it's a good thing, because if I'd been writing something with less of a plot to pull me through, I don't know that I would have gotten to the end. As it was, I finished late with an extension okayed by my editor, and rewrites that cut way into the time I had for the last book.

When I was done, I was tireder than ever. I'd stopped updating the web page when things got rough, I cut way back on my e-mail, and I still didn't have enough energy to meet my necessary pages per day. And I still had to finish **Courage of Falcons**. I got off to a steady start, but the malaise hit again, worse than before. I wanted to write the book, I was excited about the story, but the sheer physical demands of

having to do a certain number of pages every day in order to meet my deadlines was eating me alive.

I was in a bad place, and I couldn't see my way out.

But there was this project I started putting down on paper all the way back in 1993. A novel so different from everything I'd done that the only way I would ever be able to sell the thing would be to write it on spec and submit the completed manuscript. I'd been sending little snippets of it to my agent for years, and he remained excited that it was potentially a breakthrough book for me – but I'd never had the time to write it. Too many deadlines, not enough money.

But any idea that can seduce you out of a sound sleep after floating around in your head for six years is an idea with staying power, and every time I thought about this book, I got shivers. I wanted to be writing it. I've been wanting to be writing it since the idea and the characters first came to me, and the yearning has never gone away.

So here I was with a book that I couldn't get through that I had to have done, and a book I was dying to do but didn't have the time to get to, with burnout and frustration keeping me from accomplishing anything.

And Matt handed me the solution, though at the time it sounded insane to me. He said, "Give yourself Fridays to work on **P.R.**" (The code name for my secret project.)

My first response was, "Right. Cut into my time on **Courage** by whacking a day off of every work week when I'm already behind on my deadline and getting further behind every day. That'll be a lot of help." Fortunately for me, I didn't go with my first response. I was really, really stuck, and really down, and I figured any solution was better than keeping on doing what I was doing, which was beating myself on the head with a brick every day and playing too much solitaire.

So the first week, I promised myself that Friday would be my day to work on **P.R.**, whether I'd accomplished anything on **Courage** or not. That was a hard decision to make – deadlines make me edgy anyway, and I was behind on this one. And the first week, I didn't accomplish all that much on the paying project. Some – which was better than what I'd been getting in the previous two months – but not a lot. Still, I kept my promise to myself, and Friday morning I bounced out of bed at 6:30 a.m., pulled on my bathrobe, and trotted straight to the computer. For the next several hours, I immersed myself in the guilt-free bliss of **P.R.** When I had to stop, I'd done about ten pages, and I was happy. I felt good.

Monday rolled around, and I was back at work on **Courage**. And suddenly, it started to kick into gear, too. I got five pages on Monday, eight pages on Tuesday, ten pages on Wednesday, eleven pages on Thursday. In that same time, I started having ideas for updates on the web page, too, and I began doing them. Come Friday, I kept my promise to myself again, and sat down with **P.R.** And again it flew. And this Monday, I got **thirteen** on **Courage**, plus two on **P.R.** Plus this essay. Plus some e-mail that's been hanging fire for too long.

Giving myself more work actually eased my stress, eased my workload, brought the fun back into my writing. Will it continue to do so? I don't know. No one solution works forever, I guess, but this one is working very well right now.

You might not be at the point where you're stalled because of burnout, or deadline pressures, but if you keep writing, eventually you're likely to hit some variation of this problem. We all seem to run over most of the same ruts in the road sooner or later, after all. If and when you do bounce across this one, keep my busman's holiday in mind. Sometimes the only thing that will set your writing free is to write just for yourself. No matter how tight your deadline is or how desperate you are to get a particular project out the door, remember that your brain is not hardware. It doesn't come with

software programmed to produce two thousand words a day, day in and day out. Your mind is a mystery, and one that likes to play. It can do more than you can imagine, but only if you give it a little time of its own, to just burst free without constraints or specified objectives.

Give yourself a busman's holiday. Sometimes that's the very best kind.

*2004 update – My secret project, code named **P.R.** (short for **Phoebe Rain**), became **Midnight Rain** when it sold to NAL last year, and where it is the November 2004 lead title release. I did have to write the the whole book to sell it. Plus not one but three extended on-spec outlines on how I would revise it if they decided to buy it. Plus a complete rewrite of the whole project once it sold. And every bit of that work was worth it. It broke me into a brand new genre, one I've wanted for quite some time. I love the final book. It was one of the hardest things I've ever done, and I think it's one of the best.*

*I have a new secret project now. Its code name is **C.R.**. The *Busman's Holiday* thing has been working well for me. I'm sticking with it.*

NOTE: If this article resonates with you, and you want to meet other writers who share your passion and who are working in a friendly, supportive environment, [come hang out with us and make progress on your writing in my free writing community.](#)

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