



A Pep Talk from

Maureen Johnson



Dear Writer,

I have a very good friend who is Australian. I've never been to Australia, so she is constantly selling me on the merits of her homeland and setting me straight on things. For example, I have always wanted hold a koala. She informs me that koalas smell and spread disease. What I want instead, she informs me, are flying foxes, sugar bananas, rainbow lorikeets, mangosteens, and Sydney sunrises.

One thing that always impresses me in her descriptions is just how large Australia is – and how empty in the middle. Australia is comparable in size to the continental United States, but almost everyone lives on the coast. So it would be like having Los Angeles, and then New York, with almost nothing in between. Nothing except for monsters, that is. Because almost everything that lives out there in the middle of nowhere can kill you. 97% of the snakes in Australia are poisonous. The spiders are the size of washing machines, but it's the tiny ones you have to watch for. It's all teeth and venom out there. So just put a huge "here be dragons" in the middle of your mental map and you'll have a pretty good picture of Australia. The cities are said to be wonderful – paradises of culture and wine and song. It's just that middle 2,000 miles that you have to watch out for.

Perhaps this rings a bell right about now, smack in the middle of NaNoWriMo?

Those first few days with your idea... oh, how wonderful they are! How sweetly it goes! And you wander on, past the city limits, into the bush. The signposts disappear, and the creatures come out. You have wandered into The Middle. Thing is, writers spend something like 97% of their time in The Middle. Once you leave those first pages, those first days... you wander into strange land and you stay there for a long, long time.

It took me a little while, probably a few years of full-time writing, to fully accept that that middle bit was where I was going to be spending pretty much all of my time. This is the thing they don't tell you. When you see portrayals of writers on television or in movies, what are they normally doing? They're sipping coffee or cocktails, or jetting around to signings, or solving murders for fun. Lies! I mean, these things do happen*, but those are the coastal bits.

Most of the time we are deep inland – sitting at home, or at the office, or some shed or underground bunker. We eat what we find and slurp coffee from anything that is sturdier than coffee. Often, we are inappropriately dressed for any human interaction. This is because we are in the middle. And in the middle, things are rough. You make bargains with yourself like, "If I finish this chapter, I can have a shower!" Or, "If I just get this paragraph right, I can eat those stale Oreos!"

Now, I realize in saying this that perhaps I am not selling you on the writing experience. I'm supposed to be cheering you on! You already know that the middle is a hard place to be. Perhaps right about now you are asking yourself, "What, precisely, is wrong with me? Why did I decide that the best way to spend the month of November would be indoors, strapped to a chair, writing thousands of words a day, alone, friendless, and insane? Why didn't I just

agree to come to my desk every day, bang my head on it for a solid ten minutes, and be done with it? That would have been so much faster."**

Here's the thing, though...if you're doing NaNoWriMo, you are a reader, because all writers are readers. Which means that you must admire many authors. Your shelves are lined with the works of your heroes and sheroes. Every single one of them has crossed the wild country where you are now. Every single one of them has been a resident of The Middle. The ground you're treading is full of the remains of their old campsites. And somewhere around you, just out of sight, current authors you admire are making their own way across The Middle.

What's nice about NaNoWriMo is that you are traveling with a posse of thousands, all of you making your way over the mountains, through the valleys, across the creeks. You are fighting off the beasties.

And once you've crossed The Middle once or twice and you're lounging on the other side, you'll find you miss it. You'll realize you long to be out there again, under the sky and the stars. The weather changes a lot in the middle. Some days, the skies are dark and it's hard to find your way forward. Those days are long and little progress is made. Some days, it's strangely bright and clear, and suddenly you can see the horizon ahead, and dozens of possible paths present themselves to you. But every day is different, and every day there is a new way to go and a new thing to see.

You will be hooked.

And you will still want to hold a koala, even if you have been told sixteen times that they carry chlamydia.

Maureen Johnson

* Well, usually not the solving murders part, though I would like to have a crack at that. If you have had any quirky unsolved murders in your town, preferably ones that involve Egyptian artifacts or unusual poisons, please get in touch with me at once.

** Unless you are one of those people who just sail along, cranking out 2,000, 2,500, maybe even 3,000 words every day without even breaking a sweat! If so... congratulations! But don't tell the others. They won't be happy with you. I fear bad things might start turning up on your doorstep.