

Following the Rules

by Peter Collins

I took a deep breath and knocked on the door.

THE END

'You can't do that.'

'Sorry?'

'I said you can't do that. It's not allowed.'

'Who are you?'

'I'm the 1000 word challenge moderator. Our rules state that every short story must have a beginning, a middle and an end. You can't just write THE END after the first sentence. It's not allowed.'

'Why not?'

'Because it's not a story, you moron, that's why not! It's just short. There has to be a story. That's the whole point of the genre!'

'But what if I was deliberately subverting the genre to make a bold statement about the new generation of writers who get so wrapped up in the notion of form that they've forgotten simply to tell a good story?'

'Is that what you're doing?'

'It might be.'

'What do you mean, "It might be"? That's not what you're doing at all, is it? You're just too lazy to write a proper story.'

'But what if...'

'No. Write it properly or you'll get thrown out of the competition.'

'But...'

'Do it properly. Start at the beginning.'

'Bloody jobsworth!'

'Just do it.'

I took a deep breath and knocked on the door of the ink and dye factory. As usual it was opened by Barney the Labrador. 'Hello,' he said. 'Come in...'

'Hang on, hang on.'

'What's the matter now?'

'Dogs can't talk.'

'Barney can.'

'No he can't. It's impossible.'

'He's a very clever dog.'

'Let me hear him.'

'What?'

'Let me hear him talk.'

'He doesn't want to say anything just now.'

'Let me hear him talk or you're out of the competition.'

'Gottle o' gear.'

'That was you!'

'No it wasn't.'

'Yes it was! I saw your lips move.'

'Never.'

'Listen. You're pushing my patience, chummy. Get back to the story and stick to the rules.'

I took a deep breath and knocked on the door of the ink and dye factory. As usual it was opened by Barney the Labrador. He said nothing but showed me one of his paintings...

‘All right. All right. You are really beginning to get on my wick.’

‘Oh, what is it this time?’

‘Dogs can’t paint.’

‘Barney can.’

‘Don’t start that crap again.’

‘But he can. Lots of dogs can. There’s a dog called Sam in Maryland, whose paintings sell for a thousand dollars a go.’

[Pause]

‘I said, “There’s a dog called Sam in Maryland, whose paintings sell for a thousand dollars a go.”’

‘I heard you.’

‘You were Googling it, weren’t you?’

‘I was not.’

‘Yes you were. You were Googling it. And now you know I’m right, you’ve got to let me get on with my story.’

‘I’ll let you get on, but only because I think it adds an element of surrealism to your story.’

‘You’re so full of...’

‘Just get on with it, please.’

He said nothing but showed me one of his paintings. It was so amazing I wanted to change colour...

‘Oh, no. Oh, no. Please, God; tell me that’s not where you’re going with this?’

‘What are you on about?’

‘You’ve not gone through all this malarkey just to set up a crappy last line?’

‘Did you really just say, “Malarkey”?’

‘What?’

'I mean, no offence, like. But we are in the twenty-first century. Nobody uses "malarkey" these days.'

'Listen, you cretin! Forget about malarkey! It's got nothing to do with chuffing malarkey! Did you go through all this nonsense just to set up some pathetic pun?'

'I don't know what you're talking about.'

'Oh yes you do, you moronic little scumbag! You've set up this whole pile of rubbish about painting dogs, an ink factory and changing colour just so you can finish with the line, "*It was good enough to dye for!*" Come on, admit it!'

'You've spoiled it now.'

'What?'

'You've spoiled it. I bet nobody else saw it coming.'

'Nobody saw it coming! It couldn't have been more obvious if it had reversed down Oxford Street in an oversize pink tutu with warning sirens blaring out!'

'Well anyway, that's my entry.'

'You can't enter that.'

'Why not? *Be bold. Be original. Make us laugh.* That's what it says on your website.'

'Ah, but it's not all your own work, is it? I'm in it now.'

'What about a co-credit?'

'A share of the profits if it wins?'

'Fifty-fifty if it's published.'

'Congratulations, sir, on your wonderful entry and I wish you every success in the competition!'