

ELEMENT 5

By Anne Prather

(or <div id="zombies"></div><!--end #zombies-->)

I am a relative newbie to HTML, CSS, JavaScript and all that. But element 5 of the Perfect Practice method that has made me the woman I am requires creativity and innovation. As I do not know enough HTML, CSS or JavaScript to create in those languages, I am reduced to exploring my understanding of them through a skill I do know—fiction writing. Below is the unfortunate result.

Before my husband Rafe died, my world was a perfect world, in which all stylesheets were external, floats worked right the *first* time, and all sites were blessedly table-free. But then, before Rafe's death, I'd been working for myself, building one cat-breeding site after another, living in a cute little house in Northeast Seattle and griping at having to update 20 named anchors for a client on short notice.

And then Rafe died in an airline crash and life got worse very quickly.

I had to leave my cute little house because my Web development business wasn't paying the bills and I was saddled with quite a lot of debt from another failed business venture. So I sold the house, found a basement studio apartment whose first and last months' rent plus deposit was a little less than the money I had left from my husband's life insurance payout and the house sale—*after* I paid off my debt. Ouch.

The fall of 2015 closed in with a vengeance, leaving me client-free, but employed, sort of.

On a day when it looked like dusk at noon and the walls of my miserable hovel seemed to reach out to me with damp claws, I sat staring at my computer, glumly contemplating the 100th update to the wayoverstocks.com site. Updating 20 named anchors and links? I laughed just to think about it. I usually didn't stop work on wayoverstocks.com until I'd done 200 updates, because they paid me by the update and—most humiliating of all—they had spyware installed on my computer that made it impossible to do the updates in any way but the way they specified—through Dreamweaver's brain-damaged properties panel, insert tab and whatever other GUI stuff I could barely see. The sweetest dream I ever had that winter was staring at HTML code in a good code editor and flying through those links at my top typing speed—somewhere about 100 words a minute. By my estimate, it took exactly half as long to hard-code all those hrefs as it did to do them using the DW interface.

My stomach growled.

Sighing, I saved my work and—my noonday ritual—glanced at the ad that had landed me this job.

“Growing e-retailer seeks members for a team-oriented, dynamic Web design, development and maintenance team. Flexible hours, result-based pay. Knowledge of HTML-4 required, some knowledge of Photoshop, Dreamweaver and JavaScript preferred. Wayoverstocks.com is an equal-opportunity employer.”

I let my mind float back to my original vision of this job—designing cute little product displays, writing copy, hacking other people's Java scripts and, okay, maybe a few links and anchors—but mostly design and interesting coding.

However, after six months, the manager called me into his office and let me know that my design work, though good, wasn't fast enough.

“The fact is, Jessica, your vision limits what you can do as a designer. You have great ideas, but you’re just not fast enough. And we need speed.”

All I could do was nod my head like an idiot. Of course I wasn’t fast enough. That was why I’d originally been working for myself. My heart thudded. My apartment wasn’t much, but it held me and my instruments adequately.

I could tell that the manager honestly felt bad about what he was doing. I leaned forward, starting to rise, but he stopped me. “Look. I don’t want to fire you. You’re one of the best workers I’ve ever had. And there’s no one on the Web team more accurate than you are. We’d like to offer you the job of updating and maintaining our site...” He droned on about the terms and details, but I’d stopped listening. I was too busy trying to keep the tears out of my eyes. I found myself nodding, croaking out the words “Thank you,” around a giant lump in my throat and almost stumbling out the door. And that was how I wound up drowning in a sea of links and anchors on October 31, 2015.

I brought myself back to the present with a thud.

As soon as I opened my work, the speech synthesizer, set to begin reading the page to me at noon, began to squawk. Numbly I followed along, copying, pasting, typing, copying, pasting, typing, searching... At 4pm, the HTML became a scratchy blanket pulling at me. At 6pm it was drowning me, making it difficult to breathe. Glancing up at 8pm I thought I saw that the name of the company I was working for had changed. I stopped my speech synthesizer and stared at the name at the top of my screen. It was supposed to be Wayoverstocks.com. But what I saw was Zsupplies.mil.

It was surely a Halloween prank. Probably Cat (-bert left out only as a courtesy) over in HR trying to see if we were paying attention.

Damn Cat<bert>.

Silence interrupted me some four hours later. The sea of updates had evaporated; my incoming work desktop was empty, no more product receipts littered my desktop. How odd to be done at 10pm. I took three deep breaths before filling out my work report. Carefully—I checked three times—I marked the “Pay Average Number” box. My average number of updates per work period was 200. I wanted to be paid for the 200, instead of the 176 I had done. I’d pay for it later, because I’d have to top 200 for several days running to keep my average up there, but just now, the pay difference would mean more real meals and fewer Top Ramen meals.

As I clicked the Submit button, the message

“Brains for food—see HR for details”

Popped up on the screen.

Damn Cat<bert>, Cat<sh__>, Cat<...>

An eerie silence crept over my basement hole. The wind had stopped blowing, and the people upstairs had either gone to bed or were out partying. The buzz of my old fridge cut through the heavy quiet like a knife. Wanting noise, I turned on the radio, hoping for some soothing jazz. Instead, the sharp words of a newscaster cut the stilted air.

“The plague has been reported in Seattle...”

I shut the radio off.

Then I did something I never do. I got out my personal computer, turned on its WiFi card and brought up the wayoverstocks.com Web site as a user. The address filled the address bar, then flickered as a new home page loaded.

Wayoverstocks.com regrets to announce that it has been acquired...

So the name change wasn't a lie.

Curious, I let the computer load the new site and glanced at the product list. Most of it was innocent stuff, but the "All EncomPass Helmet" brought me up short. It purported to cover the head completely, with ultra-hard transparent plastic for the eyes—but nowhere to breathe.

And then I remembered that the .mil domain suffix was one of the few that hadn't become universally available in 2012. It was supposed to be reserved for the US military.

Was the "Z" in "Zsupplies" a typo?

Heart racing, I tried to find out.

Only to discover that the Zsupplies search criterion was invisible to Google.

Heart still racing, I went to bed. Sleep seemed like the only cure for the end of Halloween 2015.

The next morning, Wayoverstocks.com was its usual self, and the sea of updates lulled me into a dazed complacency, in which state I spent the next three months. But just before Christmas, we got a whole batch of new products. Nothing unusual in that—except, pray tell, who would want an artificial leg for Christmas? Or brain stew? Or any one of a number of other things that smacked more of Halloween than of Christmas. And there were a *lot* of products like this. And many fewer of the normal ones, like fuzzy slippers, irons, hair dryers and the like. More guns, joystick controlled planes...

Guns. Planes. And the All-EncomPass helmet was back, along with several competitors. A field pack, complete with a "maintenance syringe set" was featured at the top of the New Arrivals page. It was olive-drab and looked remarkably like an infantryman's pack. But what was the "maintenance syringe set"?

I followed the link (which I knew worked because I'd just updated it) and read "Complete set of brain extract injections, excellent for field campaigns. Set includes visual, audio and motor extracts. Quantity discount on 30 sets or more. Each dose good for 24 hours."

That was when I knew we were in a zombie war. And I had this awful suspicion that we weren't winning.

For the next 12 nights, I huddled in my dank room, eating slowly through the supply of Top Ramen I'd bought the previous summer at 25 for \$1. I had probably a thousand packs stacked beside my cot. I'd toil away at the site for four hours, boil up a batch and eat it, then return to work, all the while wondering just how I could make the zombies lose the war. The radio was no help—the disappearance of radio broadcasts was the first thing that gave me the clue that we were losing. I had no idea how many living soldiers were left or how many places the living had lost. All I knew was that I didn't want to be made a zombie, nor did I want to live among the dead. I had no weapons, no expertise in fighting—except for a tendency to win war-games occasionally—and no desire to venture outside to see what was happening.

But it was beginning to look like the site I toiled away at was the central supply depot for the zombie army. And I—no matter how vulnerable I felt—was the all-powerful maker of links.

For a while I pondered how I might divert supplies. I considered several options, but discarded them all because they would be too obvious too soon. On a night when I'd consumed three bags of Top Remen dry—just for variety—I finally hit on the solution. The trick was to make it look like the correct supply had been ordered all the way up until the supply was actually received. This was easy. It simply involved breaking the link between the order form and the warehouse distribution site. Replacing the products was more difficult, but again not impossible. I began coding updates with categories, U for Urgent to N for Not Necessary. Then I assigned each item a unique 12-digit random number using a bit of JavaScript code.

Next, I built a script that diverted every nth link—n being the divisor applied to the random number of each item. Next I decremented n by one each day. So on Epiphany any item whose random number divided evenly by 34 would be diverted to a different (less harmful) item. By Shrove Tuesday, on February 9, the zombie army supply chain would fail utterly. I wanted the failure to be gradual and suffocating. Assuming that poorly-fed zombies staffed the distribution warehouses, I had every reason to believe that my subterfuge wouldn't be discovered until the very end.

And then I waited, carefully updating links and anchors as I always did. Each day I checked to make sure that my PHP scripts were running, giving thanks to the Lord that I had PHP privileges on the host server. I prayed that my IP address wouldn't be traced, that zombies, being zombies wouldn't catch on too soon to what I had done.

On Epiphany 5, when I discovered that they'd been searching for my little scripts, I took emergency action. I ditched the RNG, broke all the links in another script I applied to a div with the id "zombies", wrote it in both PHP and Javascript, updated the pages to call the new scripts and then—over the next four days—wrapped succeeding pages in a bit of code that made my heart sing.

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<div id="zombies">many zombie supplies</div><!--end zombies-->
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Four days after I wrapped up the last page, there was a thundering at my door.

"Jessica! Ms. Hawthorn!"

"That's Dr. Hawthorn!" I growled under my breath.

"We know you're in there! It's the US Army—the living part. The war is over. We've won."