

**CONTACT US**  
**Erick Bengel** | Features Editor  
 ebengel@dailyastorian.com

# WEEKEND BREAK



**FOLLOW US**  
 facebook.com/  
 DailyAstorian

## MY HOUSEMATES

### DOG, CATS AND PEOPLE OF MY IMAGINATION

Meet the characters  
vying for my attention

By **MURIEL JENSEN**  
*For The Daily Astorian*

**T**his is Claire, a Westie/Cavalier King Charles mix that my late husband, Ron, and I adopted from a neighbor three years ago. Apparently her ears were produced by genes confused by the opposing characteristics of her breeds because they stick out sideways. She looks like she was sired by Yoda.

She is the dearest, sweetest companion at home, but when we walk around the neighborhood, she becomes Cujo, Stephen King's devil-dog. Westies and many other terriers were bred to chase down small pests on farms in Scotland and dispatch them without mercy. She believes that's still her job.

Only she defines 'pests' as anything on four legs coming toward us. It doesn't matter what species it is, or how big it is, she's prepared to take it on. As the person on the other end of the leash, running hell-for-leather into a brace of German Shepherds, this concerned me. I did research.

It's true that little dogs have no idea they're small. They were bred to have such determination, such a killer instinct, that nothing is too big to take on. They imagine themselves as all-powerful. It's their destiny. And I do feed her Fancy Feast pâté, so she intends to take good care of me.

My morning walks used to be about meditation, reflection, plotting a new book. Now, walking Claire is a struggle for survival. Fortunately, I've walked my neighborhood so many years that I know every shortcut, back lane, detour, so I can ward off a confrontation before it occurs. But that means I have to be vigilant. No more discussing the weather with another walker while our dogs sniff and nuzzle. No more being distracted by our phenomenal view. I am a superheroine who misses nothing.

#### Dog meets cats

This is Stormy. He's 11 and moved into our basement during a storm (hence the clever name) when he was a teen-aged kitten. He ate like a horse, then slept for an entire day in the middle of our bed. He disappeared the following day and returned that night with his sister. I thought I was seeing double. They are almost identical, except that Stormy has a strong, alley-cat face, and Melanie's is more feminine.

Here she is. She's smaller than her brother, has become a little more pudgy over time because of an affinity for cheese and embodies the term "fraidy cat." The smallest noise, a sudden movement on my part, or a knock on the door and she's gone until the intrusion has been neutralized. The laid-back Lab we had when the cats joined us, allowed Stormy and Melanie to rule the roost. He was so self-confident that he had nothing to prove. Claire came as an unpleasant surprise.

At first sight of the dog and her very interested tail wag, Melanie moved into the basement. She was used to being part of a large dog's pack, but she'd never seen something her own size get in her face, in her



Photos by Muriel Jensen

**Claire, a Westie/Cavalier King Charles mix, at Thanksgiving.**

food bowl, or on her blanket. Claire never gave chase, seeming to understand that what lived in her home required different manners than what lived outside, but Melanie wasn't taking any chances.

The struggle for King/Queen began immediately between Claire and Stormy. The territory is my lap, particularly if there's a silky throw on it. The moment my knees begin to bend to the sitting position, the dog and cat race each other across the room toward me. It requires good nerves to sit still and let them come. The winner (usually Stormy because he's leaner) lands on my knees and the other sits beside me, ever watchful for the opportunity to step up to the place of privilege. Melanie, who finally moved back upstairs, takes possession of the dog bed — a cool circle of plush fabric with a memory-foam pillow in the bottom. If I'm on my feet and there's no lap to fight over, the dog bed becomes the territory in dispute. It's like "Game of Thrones" with less murder.

#### Going bananas?

Lately, there's no room on my lap because of my laptop. I've been writing. Stormy, a cat of determination, will jump up beside me, step on the computer,

and look me in the eye. "I thought you retired," he says.

"Yeah, yeah."

For reasons I don't understand and therefore can't explain, my brain is suddenly full of story ideas. And the characters that populate those ideas make themselves at home all around us. I try to ignore them, but it doesn't work. Anyone who writes fiction for a living can tell you that characters don't exist simply on paper. If you pretend they aren't there, they take up residence in your head and try to knock their way out. In the old days, when I was working all the time, and creativity was a self-generating bonus, they would shout in my ear from the inside, "Do me next! Do me! Do me!"

But this isn't the old days, and the ideas in my head are new to me in content and genre.

Following me around right now is a very pretty blonde in her late 30s, Megan, who stood with her daughter on a hill when the girl was struck by lightning and killed. Megan was struck but survived with a burn mark on her temple. Now when she puts her hand on someone, she can see inside them — good things and bad. Sometimes she foresees things. Traumatic things. She's a shell of the woman she used to be, inconsolable over the loss of her child. She pushed the man she used to love out of her life so he doesn't have to experience her darkness — until one sleepless night when she "sees" him being murdered and has to warn him.

How did this idea come to the woman who wrote lighthearted, often comedic romance? I've asked Megan to explain herself and she tells me simply, "Write me, give me life and I'll tell you." She plagues me all day long.

At night, when I'm trying to fall asleep, I find myself in a mansion in Regency Period London (1811-1820 in England and Ireland when King George III was deemed unfit to rule and his son took his place as the Prince Regent. It's the time Jane Austen wrote about.) I know nothing about it, so I don't know why it's invading my space, but it is. There's a young couple who've married to give the young hero respectability. His older brother has died, and he, with a wild, younger-son reputation, must now step into the role of heir with the success of a large family business as stake. A wife gives him an aura of maturity. Unbeknownst to him, she is struggling to support three half-siblings who were pushed out of their home by an uncle, determined to redirect their inheritance his way. She hasn't told her new husband about them because the dastardly uncle is a major client of his. And the complications accelerate and continue. What!?

Then there are four women my age who start a business called "Granny Investigations"; a young woman trying to start over, who buys a Victorian chair at a church sale and takes it home to find a ghost in it; a divorced couple on the run with their two children because his research for a true crime novel has revealed a killer no one suspected.

And they just keep coming! My living space is crowded with the people of my imagination. So I'm going to try to sell another book.

Or maybe I'm just going bananas.

Jensen wrote for *Harlequin* from 1984 until her recent retirement. She's published 93 books in the *American Romance* line, *Superromance* and *Harlequin Historicals*. She lives in Astoria with a Westie mix named Claire and a pair of Tabby cats. She has three children, nine grandchildren, and the great-grandchildren are still coming.



**LEFT: Stormy. RIGHT: Melanie.**

