

Take Up Your Bed and Walk

“Women have sat indoors all these millions of years, so that by this time, the very walls are permeated by their creative force, which has, indeed so overcharged the capacity of bricks and mortar that it must needs harness itself to pens and brushes and business and politics.” Virginia Wolf

One day, in early May, after hurriedly penciling out a poem, throwing her son’s sweat-soaked soccer socks in with a load of whites, tossing chunks of bloody red stew meat into a broth of carrots and onions and potatoes, and tucking a tuna sandwich into wax paper, Judith raced off to her job selling luxury condominiums on the lake only to discover that the cool spring air had somehow taken on the viscosity of Jell-O. It pressed down on her from all sides, an invisible, impenetrable, wall of Jell-O.

Judith froze.

Her feet stuck fast to the porch step. Panic swept through her. What if she couldn’t keep up? What if she ran out of time? What if she got sick, like her friend, Anna, battling breast cancer, or worse yet, what if this happened again? Somewhere dangerous, like on Willy Street with a Badger Cab barreling down Baldwin and racing through the light—she’d be dead or in a coma. Even if she survived, it was unlikely she’d ever finish her novel.

Good God, her novel. What day was it? What week? The editor in New York was waiting for a final revision, for a finished product, for something that seemed, at least in the present moment, out of Judith’s reach. Lately her writing felt like a ladder with no rungs, nowhere to dig in her feet. She could see the required ascent in her mind’s eye,

but not how to get there. Her dreams were filled with books, piles of them, published books, glinting with gold and silver seals of various awards. Yet, what were her chances if she couldn't even manage to get the manuscript in the mail?

Something had to change. She couldn't go on like this. She'd been working six-day weeks and almost every weekend, squeezing the writing in, here and there. She was tired, no, no . . . she was exhausted. Drained. Depleted. Utterly defeated.

Judith closed her eyes and drew in a deep breath. How did women do it? Did the novels and essays and poems bouncing around in their brains remain forever unfinished, or worse yet, unwritten? How many of them, like the women she knew—Sarah, going on her third child, who swore she'd get back to poetry after the kids were in school and Kelly with her high-powered lobbying job, flitting back and fourth from DC, confessing over coffee that all her reading was work related now, and Joan whose new husband filed for bankruptcy so that she had postponed her plans to go back to school—how many women simply give up before they ever really start?

Something had to change.

Judith needed more time. Flexibility. She could smell the musty scent of death. She could feel that the low, dull ache in her heart, that graying at the edges of her soul. There was no mystery to what this was. Judith had arm-wrestled with depression before—a fate worse than death. A life without life. A long slow decent down a river of misery.

Of course, she needed her job. All single-mothers need an income, but something had to change. She could not spend the rest of her life walking through Jell-O. Fighting for air. She'd be no good to anyone, not herself, not her son, and certainly not the wild

and woolly world of real estate. Out of force of habit she willed herself to work and upon arriving immediately scheduled a meeting with her boss.

Pleased with her recent performance, he smiled, and thrust a substantial bonus check into her hands. Judith thanked him, but she barely glanced at the check, money or no money, something had to change. She'd already formulated a strategy for such a change. A realistic request using a pay structure already in place and like the somewhat desperate Oliver Twist of Dickens' classic novel, Judith presented what she was certain would be a win/win proposal. To her surprise Judith soon found herself facing an irate man. A man who did everything but beat his chest to remind Judith that she was nothing but an employee; a dime-a-dozen-sales-associate and a woman, at that. Less directly, his tone and body language implied that Judith, a reputed lesbian (who had historically spurred interoffice flirtations) should be smart enough to take the bananas he offered—after all who was she to ask for *more*, of anything?

“Go!” He sputtered as Judith turned to pack her desk. “Go ahead and write become a legend in your own mind because you're not even in my league!”

Over the years, Judith had witnessed plenty of male posturing as well as an occasional temper tantrum in the work place, so she did not take this man's parting words personally, she did however, take them seriously, by that we mean, thoughtfully. The crux of the problem, in addition to who controlled the bananas, seemed to be Judith's desire to work, along with the top producer and the only man on the sales team, on 100% commission in exchange for autonomy and time. Whether it was fear of the ensuing freedom such a change could bring, or the worry that other women might want the same, Judith suddenly saw how this perceived loss of control might be deemed dangerous.

Perhaps her fatal error had been to point out that this would put the women in the office on a more even playing field with the men. Clearly, not his goal.

But, enough of his goals. What of hers? What of her writing? His advice, while not kindly intended, might not be so misaligned. In fact, *yes*, that was exactly what she needed to do: become a legend in her own mind.

They say when you decide to take yourself seriously the universe will follow. Yet why, Judith puzzled, did pursuing her art always make her feel so tentative and guilty? Did other women struggle with this undying sense of divided loyalties, with these fathomless fears, with this pathetic lack of self-confidence, even when it was clear that they were perfectly competent in other areas of their lives? Would she write her novels and starve as her former boss had inferred, or more terrifying yet, would she be forced to crawl back on her knees begging him or some other person in a position of power to share the damn bananas?

These were the arrows that pierced her poet's heart.

As Judith drove home, she watched the glowing multi-million dollar tower grow smaller behind her. The beaming penthouse bounced afternoon sunlight back and forth between the building and her rearview mirror. Out of habit, she reached up to adjust the mirror and before she realized what had happened, it broke off in her hand. She pulled to the side of the road. Holding the mirror in her hand, she studied her own reflection. It was clear now, what she had to do. She tossed the mirror over her shoulder into the back seat and rummaged through her briefcase. She pulled out a yellow college ruled notebook, a notebook filled with half-written poems and wild imaginings. She kicked off her work shoes and slid on her walking shoes. She got out, locked the car and with the

notebook in hand, headed for the lake. The air smelled dense, of solid black earth and tulips. Judith had not felt this light, this free, in years, and it would be many more, before she would write, thank that angry man, for the words, the inspiration, the poem that saved her life:

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Pick up your pen and write
Become a legend in your own mind
Because this
Is where all good and wondrous
Things begin
For the mind is simply a shadow
Of the soul
And to know
Really know, one's soul
Is a gift
Often lifetimes in the making
And it takes time
To chip away the glacial rocks
Of our own self-created impediments
But indeed,
We must not stray from our task
For the hour is at hand
We must take up our beds and walk
For it is never too late to live the
Life you've imagined
And the secret my friend
Is—there is NONE
We are all in the same league
Our spirits and our bodies are
Only the grist of this
Collective consciousness
Which is beyond the Great Beyond
Too large for our small minds to grasp
Unless, or maybe only perhaps,
Until we find the courage
To take up our beds and walk
To pick up our pens and write
To become—a legend in our own mind.