

BIG MAGIC

Build even more space.

You will need it.

And then go deep within that space—as far in as you can possibly go—and make absolutely whatever you want to make.

It's nobody's business but your own.

Persistence





Taking Vows

When I was about sixteen years old, I took vows to become a writer.

I mean, I *literally* took vows—the way a young woman of an entirely different nature might take vows to become a nun. Of course, I had to invent my own ceremony around these vows, because there is no official holy Sacrament for a teenager who longs to become a writer, but I used my imagination and my passion and I made it happen. I retreated to my bedroom one night and turned off all the lights. I lit a candle, got down on my honest-to-God knees, and swore my fidelity to writing for the rest of my natural life.

My vows were strangely specific and, I would still argue, pretty realistic. I didn't make a promise that I would be a successful writer, because I sensed that success was not

under my control. Nor did I promise that I would be a great writer, because I didn't know if I could be great. Nor did I give myself any time limits for the work, like, "If I'm not published by the time I'm thirty, I'll give up on this dream and go find another line of work." In fact, I didn't put any conditions or restrictions on my path at all. My deadline was: never.

Instead, I simply vowed to the universe that I would write forever, regardless of the result. I promised that I would try to be brave about it, and grateful, and as uncomplaining as I could possibly be. I also promised that I would never ask writing to take care of me financially, but that *I would always take care of it*—meaning that I would always support us both, by any means necessary. I did not ask for any external rewards for my devotion; I just wanted to spend my life as near to writing as possible—forever close to that source of all my curiosity and contentment—and so I was willing to make whatever arrangements needed to be made in order to get by.

Learning

The curious thing is, I actually kept those vows. I kept them for years. I still keep them. I have broken many promises in my life (including a marriage vow), but I have never broken that promise.

I even kept those vows through the chaos of my twenties—a time in my life when I was shamefully irresponsible in every other imaginable way. Yet despite all my immaturity and carelessness and recklessness, I still honored my vows to writing with the fealty of a holy pilgrim.

I wrote every day throughout my twenties. For a while, I had a boyfriend who was a musician, and he practiced every day. He played scales; I wrote small fictional scenes. It was the same idea—to keep your hand in your craft, to stay close to it. On bad days, when I felt no inspiration at all, I would set the kitchen timer for thirty minutes and make myself sit there and scribble something, *anything*. I had read an interview with John Updike where he said that some of the best novels you've ever read were written in an hour a day; I figured I could always carve out at least thirty minutes somewhere to dedicate myself to my work, no mat-

ter what else was going on or how badly I believed the work was going.

Generally speaking, the work did go badly, too. I *really* didn't know what I was doing. I felt sometimes like I was trying to carve scrimshaw while wearing oven mitts. Everything took forever. I had no chops, no game. It could take me a whole year just to finish one tiny short story. Most of the time, all I was doing was imitating my favorite authors, anyhow. I went through a Hemingway stage (who doesn't?), but I also went through a pretty serious Annie Proulx stage and a rather embarrassing Cormac McCarthy stage. But that's what you have to do at the beginning; everybody imitates before they can innovate.

For a while, I tried to write like a Southern gothic novelist, because I found that to be a far more exotic voice than my own New England sensibility. I was not an especially convincing Southern writer, of course, but that's only because I'd never lived a day in the South. (A friend of mine who actually was from the South said to me in exasperation, after reading one of my stories, "You've got all these old men sittin' around the porch eatin' peanuts, and you ain't never sat around a porch eatin' peanuts in your *life!* You got some nerve, girl!" Oh, well. We try.)

None of it was easy, but that wasn't the point. I had

never asked writing to be easy; I had only asked writing to be *interesting*. And it was always interesting to me. Even when I couldn't do it right, it was still interesting to me. It still interests me. Nothing has ever interested me more. That profound sense of interest kept me working, even as I had no tangible successes.

And slowly I improved.

It's a simple and generous rule of life that whatever you practice, you will improve at. For instance: If I had spent my twenties playing basketball every single day, or making pastry dough every single day, or studying auto mechanics every single day, I'd probably be pretty good at foul shots and croissants and transmissions by now.

Instead, I learned how to write.

A Caveat

But this does not mean that unless you began your creative endeavors in your twenties, it's too late!

God, no! Please don't get that idea.

It's never too late.

I could give you dozens of examples of amazing people

who didn't start following their creative paths until later—sometimes much later—in life. But for the sake of economy, I will only tell you about one of them.

Her name was Winifred.

I knew Winifred back in the 1990s, in Greenwich Village. I first met her at her ninetieth birthday party, which was quite a wild bash. She was a friend of a friend of mine (a guy who was in his twenties; Winifred had friends of all ages and backgrounds). Winifred was a bit of a luminary around Washington Square back in the day. She was a full-on bohemian legend who had lived in the Village forever. She had long red hair that she wore piled glamorously on top of her head, she was always draped in ropes of amber beads, and she and her late husband (a scientist) had spent their vacations chasing typhoons and hurricanes all over the world, just for fun. She kind of *was* a hurricane herself.

Winifred was the most vividly alive woman I had ever met in my young life, so one day, looking for inspiration, I asked her, "What's the best book you've ever read?"

She said, "Oh, darling. I could never narrow it down to just one book, because so many books are important to me. But I can tell you my favorite *subject*. Ten years ago, I began studying the history of ancient Mesopotamia, and it became my passion, and let me tell you—*it has totally changed my life.*"

For me, at the age of twenty-five, to hear a ninety-year-old widow speak of having her life changed by passion (and so recently!) was a revelation. It was one of those moments where I could almost *feel* my perspective expanding, as if my mind were being ratcheted open several notches and was now welcoming in all sorts of new possibilities for what a woman's life could look like.

But as I learned more about Winifred's passion, what struck me most was that she was now an acknowledged expert in the history of ancient Mesopotamia. She had given that field of study an entire decade of her life, after all—and if you devote yourself to *anything* diligently for ten years, that will make you an expert. (That's the time it would take to earn two master's degrees and a doctorate.) She had gone to the Middle East on several archaeological digs; she had learned cuneiform script; she was friendly with the greatest scholars and curators on the subject; she had never missed a related museum exhibit or lecture when it came to town. People now sought out Winifred for answers about ancient Mesopotamia, because now *she* was the authority.

I was a young woman who had only recently finished college. There was still some dull and limited part of my imagination that believed my education was over because NYU had granted me a diploma. Meeting Winifred,

though, made me realize that your education isn't over when *they* say it's over; your education is over when *you* say it's over. And Winifred—back when she was a mere girl of eighty—had firmly decided: *It ain't over yet.*

So when can you start pursuing your most creative and passionate life?

You can start whenever you decide to start.

The Empty Bucket

kept working.

I kept writing.

I kept not getting published, but that was okay, because I was getting *educated.*

The most important benefit of my years of disciplined, solitary work was that I began to recognize the emotional patterns of creativity—or, rather, I began to recognize *my* patterns. I could see that there were psychological cycles to my own creative process, and that those cycles were always pretty much the same.

“Ah,” I learned to say when I would inevitably begin to lose heart for a project just a few weeks after I'd enthusiastically begun it. “This is the part of the process where I

wish I'd never engaged with this idea at all. I remember this. I always go through this stage.”

Or: “This is the part where I tell myself that I'll never write a good sentence again.”

Or: “This is the part where I beat myself up for being a lazy loser.”

Or: “This is the part where I begin fantasizing in terror about how bad the reviews are going to be—if this thing even gets published at all.”

Or, once the project was finished: “This is the part where I panic that I'll never be able to make anything again.”

Over years of devotional work, though, I found that if I just stayed with the process and didn't panic, I could pass safely through each stage of anxiety and on to the next level. I heartened myself with reminders that these fears were completely natural human reactions to interaction with the unknown. If I could convince myself that I was supposed to be there—that we are *meant* to engage with inspiration, and that inspiration *wants* to work with us—then I could usually get through my emotional minefield without blowing myself up before the project was finished.

At such times, I could almost hear creativity talking to me while I spun off into fear and doubt.

Stay with me, it would say. Come back to me. Trust me.

I decided to trust it.

My single greatest expression of stubborn gladness has been the endurance of that trust.

A particularly elegant commentary on this instinct came from the Nobel laureate Seamus Heaney, who said that—when one is learning how to write poetry—one should not expect it to be immediately good. The aspiring poet is constantly lowering a bucket only halfway down a well, coming up time and again with nothing but empty air. The frustration is immense. But you must keep doing it, anyway.

After many years of practice, Heaney explained, “the chain draws unexpectedly tight and you have dipped into waters that will continue to entice you back. You’ll have broken the skin on the pool of yourself.”

The Shit Sandwich

Back in my early twenties, I had a good friend who was an aspiring writer, just like me. I remember how he used to descend into dark funks of depression about his lack of success, about his inability to get published. He would sulk and rage.

“I don’t want to be sitting around,” he would moan. “I want this to all add up to something. I want this to become my *job!*”

Even back then, I thought there was something off about his attitude.

Mind you, I wasn’t being published, either, and I was hungry, too. I would’ve *loved* to have all the same stuff he wanted—success, reward, affirmation. I was no stranger to disappointment and frustration. But I remember thinking that learning how to endure your disappointment and frustration *is* part of the job of a creative person. If you want to be an artist of any sort, it seemed to me, then handling your frustration is a fundamental aspect of the work—perhaps the single most fundamental aspect of the work. Frustration is not an interruption of your process; frustration *is* the process. The fun part (the part where it doesn’t feel like work at all) is when you’re actually creating something wonderful, and everything’s going great, and everyone loves it, and you’re flying high. But such instants are rare. You don’t just get to leap from bright moment to bright moment. How you manage yourself *between* those bright moments, when things aren’t going so great, is a measure of how devoted you are to your vocation, and how equipped you are for the weird demands of creative living. Holding yourself together through all the phases of creation is where the real work lies.

I recently read a fabulous blog by a writer named Mark Manson, who said that the secret to finding your purpose in life is to answer this question in total honesty: “What’s your favorite flavor of shit sandwich?”

What Manson means is that every single pursuit—no matter how wonderful and exciting and glamorous it may initially seem—comes with its own brand of shit sandwich, its own lousy side effects. As Manson writes with profound wisdom: “Everything sucks, some of the time.” You just have to decide what sort of suckage you’re willing to deal with. So the question is not so much “What are you passionate about?” The question is “What are you passionate *enough* about that you can endure the most disagreeable aspects of the work?”

Manson explains it this way: “If you want to be a professional artist, but you aren’t willing to see your work rejected hundreds, if not thousands, of times, then you’re done before you start. If you want to be a hotshot court lawyer, but can’t stand the eighty-hour workweeks, then I’ve got bad news for you.”

Because if you love and want something enough—whatever it is—then you don’t really mind eating the shit sandwich that comes with it.

If you truly love having babies, for instance, then you don’t care about the morning sickness.

If you truly want to be a minister, you don’t mind listening to other people’s problems.

If you truly love performing, you will accept the discomforts and inconveniences of living on the road.

If you truly want to see the world, you’ll risk getting pickpocketed on a train.

If you truly want to practice your figure skating, you’ll get up before dawn on cold mornings to go to the ice rink and skate.

My friend back in the day claimed that he wanted to be a writer with all his heart, but it turns out he didn’t want to eat the shit sandwich that comes along with that pursuit. He loved writing, sure, but he didn’t love it *enough* to endure the ignominy of not getting the results he wanted, when he wanted them. He didn’t want to work so hard at anything unless he was guaranteed some measure of worldly success on his own terms.

Which means, I think, that he only wanted to be a writer with *half* his heart.

And yeah, soon enough, he quit.

Which left me hungrily eyeballing his half-eaten shit sandwich, wanting to ask, “Are you gonna finish that?”

Because that’s how much I loved the work: I would even eat *somebody else’s shit sandwich* if it meant that I got to spend more time writing.

Your Day Job

The whole time I was practicing to be a writer, I always had a day job.

Even after I got published, I didn't quit my day job, just to be on the safe side. In fact, I didn't quit my day job (or my day *jobs*, I should say) until I had already written three books—and those three books were all published by major houses and were all reviewed nicely in the *New York Times*. One of them had even been nominated for a National Book Award. From an outside perspective, it might have looked like I'd already made it. But I wasn't taking any chances, so I kept my day job.

It wasn't until my fourth book (and that book was freaking *Eat Pray Love*, for heaven's sake) that I finally allowed myself to quit all other work and become nothing other than a writer of books.

I held on to those other sources of income for so long because I never wanted to burden my writing with the responsibility of paying for my life. I knew better than to ask this of my writing, because over the years, I have watched so many other people murder their creativity by demand-

PERSISTENCE

ing that their art pay the bills. I've seen artists drive themselves broke and crazy because of this insistence that they are not legitimate creators unless they can exclusively live off their creativity. And when their creativity fails them (meaning: doesn't pay the rent), they descend into resentment, anxiety, or even bankruptcy. Worst of all, they often quit creating at all.

I've always felt like this is so cruel to your work—to demand a regular paycheck from it, as if creativity were a government job, or a trust fund. Look, if you can manage to live comfortably off your inspiration forever, that's fantastic. That's everyone's dream, right? But don't let that dream turn into a nightmare. Financial demands can put so much pressure on the delicacies and vagaries of inspiration. You must be smart about providing for yourself. To claim that you are too creative to think about financial questions is to infantilize yourself—and I beg you not to infantilize yourself, because it's demeaning to your soul. (While it's lovely to be *childlike* in your pursuit of creativity, in other words, it's dangerous to be *childish*.)

Other self-infantilizing fantasies include: the dream of marrying for money, the dream of inheriting money, the dream of winning the lottery, and the dream of finding a "studio wife" (male or female) who will look after all your

mundane concerns so that you can be free to commune with inspiration forever in a peaceful cocoon, utterly sheltered from the inconveniences of reality.

Come, now.

This is a *world*, not a womb. You can look after yourself in this world while looking after your creativity at the same time—just as people have done for ages. What’s more, there is a profound sense of honor to be found in looking after yourself, and that honor will resonate powerfully in your work; it will make your work *stronger*.

Also, it may be the case that there are seasons when you can live off your art and seasons when you cannot. This need not be regarded as a crisis; it’s only natural in the flux and uncertainty of a creative life. Or maybe you took a big risk in order to follow some creative dream and it didn’t quite pay off, so now you have to work for the man for a while to save up money until it’s time to go chase your next dream—that’s fine, too. Just do it. But to yell at your creativity, saying, “You must earn money for me!” is sort of like yelling at a cat; it has no idea what you’re talking about, and all you’re doing is scaring it away, because you’re making really loud noises and your face looks weird when you do that.

I held on to my day jobs for so long because I wanted to

keep my creativity free and safe. I maintained alternative streams of income so that, when my inspiration wasn’t flowing, I could say to it reassuringly, “No worries, mate. Just take your time. I’m here whenever you’re ready.” I was always willing to work hard so that my creativity could play lightly. In so doing, I became my *own* patron; I became my *own* studio wife.

So many times I have longed to say to stressed-out, financially strapped artists, “Just take the pressure off yourself, dude, and get a job!”

There’s no dishonor in having a job. What is dishonorable is scaring away your creativity by demanding that it pay for your entire existence. This is why, whenever anyone tells me they’re quitting their day job in order to write a novel, my palms get a little sweaty. This is why, when anyone tells me that their plan for getting out of debt is to sell their first screenplay, I’m like, *Yikes*.

Write that novel, yes! Definitely try to sell that screenplay! I hope with all my heart that good fortune finds you and showers you with abundance. But don’t count on the payoff, I beg of you—only because such payoffs are exceedingly rare, and you might very well kill off your creativity by holding it to such a harsh ultimatum.

You can always make your art on the side of your bread-

and-butter job. That's what I did for three whole books—and if it hadn't been for the bananas success of *Eat Pray Love*, that's what I'd still be doing now. That's what Toni Morrison did when she used to get up at five o'clock in the morning in order to work on her novels before going off to her real-life career in the publishing world. That's what J. K. Rowling did back when she was an impoverished single mother, struggling to get by and writing on the side. That's what my friend Ann Patchett did back when she worked as a waitress at TGI Fridays and wrote in her spare hours. That's what a busy married couple I know does—both of them illustrators, both of them with full-time jobs—when, every morning, they rise a full hour before their children awake to sit across from each other in their small studio space and quietly draw.

People don't do this kind of thing because they have all kinds of extra time and energy for it; they do this kind of thing because their creativity matters to them enough that they are willing to make all kinds of extra sacrifices for it.

Unless you come from landed gentry, that's what *everyone* does.

Have an Affair

Why do people persist in creating, even when it's difficult and inconvenient and often financially unrewarding?

They persist because they are in love.

They persist because they are hot for their vocation.

Let me explain what I mean by *hot*.

You know how people who are having extramarital affairs always seem to manage to find time to see each other in order to have wild, transgressive sex? It doesn't seem to matter if those people have full-time jobs and families at home to support; they still somehow always manage to find the time to sneak off and see their lover—no matter what the difficulties, the risks, or the costs. Even if they get only fifteen minutes together in a stairwell, they will take that time and they will make out with each other like crazy. (If anything, the fact that they have only fifteen minutes together somehow makes it all even hotter.)

When people are having an affair, they don't mind losing sleep, or missing meals. They will make whatever sacrifices they have to make, and they will blast through any obstacles, in order to be alone with the object of their devotion and obsession—*because it matters to them*.

Let yourself fall in love with your creativity like that and see what happens.

Stop treating your creativity like it's a tired, old, unhappy marriage (a grind, a drag) and start regarding it with the fresh eyes of a passionate lover. Even if you have only fifteen minutes a day in a stairwell alone with your creativity, take it. Go hide in that stairwell and make out with your art! (You can get a lot of making out done in fifteen minutes, as any furtive teenager can tell you.) Sneak off and have an affair with your most creative self. Lie to everyone about where you're actually going on your lunch break. Pretend you're traveling on a business trip when secretly you're retreating in order to paint, or to write poetry, or to draw up the plans for your future organic mushroom farm. Conceal it from your family and friends, whatever it is you're up to. Slip away from everyone else at the party and go off to dance alone with your ideas in the dark. Wake yourself up in the middle of the night in order to be alone with your inspiration, while nobody is watching. You don't need that sleep right now; you can give it up.

What else are you willing to give up in order to be alone with your beloved?

Don't think of it all as burdensome; think of it all as *sexy*.

Nobody's Thinking About You

Long ago, when I was in my insecure twenties, I met a clever, independent, creative, and powerful woman in her mid-seventies, who offered me a superb piece of life wisdom.

She said: "We all spend our twenties and thirties trying so hard to be perfect, because we're so worried about what people will think of us. Then we get into our forties and fifties, and we finally start to be free, because we decide that we don't give a damn what anyone thinks of us. But you won't be completely free until you reach your sixties and seventies, when you finally realize this liberating truth—*nobody was ever thinking about you, anyhow.*"

They aren't. They weren't. They never were.

People are mostly just thinking about themselves. People don't have time to worry about what you're doing, or how well you're doing it, because they're all caught up in their own dramas. People's attention may be drawn to you for a moment (if you succeed or fail spectacularly and publicly, for instance), but that attention will soon enough

revert right back to where it's always been—*on themselves*. While it may seem lonely and horrible at first to imagine that you aren't anyone else's first order of business, there is also a great release to be found in this idea. You are free, because everyone is too busy fussing over themselves to worry all that much about you.

Go be whomever you want to be, then.

Do whatever you want to do.

Pursue whatever fascinates you and brings you to life.

Create whatever you want to create—and let it be stupendously imperfect, because it's exceedingly likely that nobody will even notice.

And that's *awesome*.

Done Is Better Than Good

The only reason I was able to persist in completing my first novel was that I allowed it to be stupendously imperfect. I pushed myself to continue writing it, even though I strongly disapproved of what I was producing. That book was so far from perfect, it made me nuts. I remember

pacing around in my room during the years that I worked on the novel, trying to gin up my courage to return to that lackluster manuscript every single day, despite its awfulness, reminding myself of this vow: “I never promised the universe that I would be a *great* writer, goddamn it! I just promised the universe that I would be a *writer*!”

At seventy-five pages in, I nearly stopped. It felt too terrible to continue, too deeply embarrassing. But I pushed through my own shame only because I decided that I *refused* to go to my grave with seventy-five pages of an unfinished manuscript sitting in my desk drawer. I did not want to be that person. The world is filled with too many unfinished manuscripts as it is, and I didn’t want to add another one to that bottomless pile. So no matter how much I thought my work stank, I had to persist.

I also kept remembering what my mother always used to say: “Done is better than good.”

I heard that simple adage of my mother’s again and again the entire time I was growing up. This was not because Carole Gilbert was a slacker. On the contrary, she was incredibly industrious and efficient—but more than anything else, she was pragmatic. There are only so many hours in a day, after all. There are only so many days in a year, only so many years in a life. You do what you can do,

as competently as possible within a reasonable time frame, and then you let it go. When it came to everything from washing the dishes to wrapping Christmas presents, my mother’s thinking was much in line with General George Patton’s: “A good plan violently executed now is better than a perfect plan executed next week.”

Or, to paraphrase: A good-enough novel violently written now is better than a perfect novel meticulously written never.

I also think my mother understood this radical notion—that mere completion is a rather honorable achievement in its own right. What’s more, it’s a rare one. Because the truth of the matter is, most people don’t finish things! Look around you, the evidence is everywhere: *People don’t finish*. They begin ambitious projects with the best of intentions, but then they get stuck in a mire of insecurity and doubt and hairsplitting . . . and they stop.

So if you can just complete something—merely complete it!—you’re already miles ahead of the pack, right there.

You may want your work to be perfect, in other words; I just want mine to be finished.

In Praise of Crooked Houses

I could sit down with you right now and go through each of my books, page by page, and tell you everything that's wrong with them. This would make for an incredibly boring afternoon for both of us, but I could do it. I could show you everything that I elected not to fix, change, improve, or fuss over. I could show you every shortcut I took when I couldn't figure out how to more elegantly solve a complicated narrative puzzle. I could show you characters I killed off because I didn't know what else to do with them. I could show you gaps in logic and holes in research. I could show you all kinds of sticky tape and shoelaces holding those projects together.

To save time, though, let me offer just one representative example. In my most recent novel, *The Signature of All Things*, there is an unfortunately underdeveloped character. She is rather egregiously improbable (I believe, anyhow), and her presence is little more than a convenience to the plot. I knew in my heart—even as I was writing her—that I did not get this character quite right, but I couldn't

figure out how to bring her to life better, as I should have. I was hoping to get away with it. Sometimes you do get away with things. I was hoping nobody would notice. But then I gave the book to some of my early readers while the book was still in manuscript, and they all pointed out the problem with this character.

I considered trying to fix it. But what it would have taken for me to go back and remedy that one character was too much effort for not enough reward. For one thing, fixing this character would've required adding an additional fifty or seventy pages to a manuscript that was already over seven hundred pages long—and at some point, you really have to show mercy to your readers and cut the thing off. I also felt it was too risky. To solve the problem of this character, I would've had to dismantle the entire novel back down to the early chapters and start over—and in rebuilding the story so radically, I feared, I might end up destroying a book that was already done, and was already *good enough*. It would be like a carpenter tearing down a finished house and completely starting over because he'd noticed—at the very end of the construction project—that the foundation was off by a few inches. Sure, by the end of the second construction, the foundation might be straighter, but the charm of the original structure might have been destroyed, while months of time had been wasted.

I decided not to do it.

In short, I'd worked on that novel tirelessly for four years, had given it a tremendous amount of effort, love, and faith, and basically I liked it the way it was. Yes, there was some crookedness, but the walls were essentially strong, the roof held, and the windows functioned, and anyhow, I don't entirely mind living in a crooked house. (I grew up in a crooked house; they aren't such bad places.) I felt that my novel was an interesting finished product—maybe even more interesting for its slightly wonky angles—so I let it go.

And do you know what happened when I released my admittedly imperfect book into the world?

Not much.

The earth stayed on its axis. Rivers did not run backward. Birds didn't drop dead out of the air. I got some good reviews, some bad reviews, some indifferent reviews. Some people loved *The Signature of All Things*, some people didn't. A plumber who came over one day to repair my kitchen sink noticed the book sitting on the table and said, "I can tell you right now, lady, that book ain't gonna sell—not with *that* title." Some people wished the novel had been shorter; others wished it were longer. Some readers wished the story had more dogs in it and less masturbation. A few critics made note of that one underdeveloped character, but nobody seemed overly bothered by her.

In conclusion: A whole bunch of people had some opinions about my novel for a short while, and then everyone moved on, because people are busy and they have their own lives to think about. But I'd had a thrilling intellectual and emotional experience writing *The Signature of All Things*—and the merits of that creative adventure were mine to keep forever. Those four years of my life had been wonderfully well spent. When I finished that novel, it was not a perfect thing, but I still felt it was the best work I'd ever done, and I believed I was a far better writer than I'd been before I began it. I would not trade a minute of that encounter for anything.

But now that work was finished, and it was time for me to shift my attention to something new—something that would also, someday, be released as *good enough*. This is how I've always done it, and this is how I will keep doing it, so long as I am able.

Because that is the anthem of my people.

That is the Song of the Disciplined Half-Ass.

Success

All those years when I was diligently laboring away at both my day jobs and my writing practice, I knew there was never any promise that any of this would work out.

I always knew that I might not get what I wished for—that I might never become a published writer. Not everybody makes it to a place of comfortable success in the arts. Most people don't. And while I've always believed in magical thinking, I wasn't a child, either; I knew that wishing would not make it so. Talent might not make it so, either. Dedication might not make it so. Even amazing professional contacts—which I didn't have, in any case—might not make it so.

Creative living is stranger than other, more worldly pursuits. The usual rules do not apply. In normal life, if you're good at something and you work hard at it, you will likely succeed. In creative endeavors, maybe not. Or maybe you will succeed for a spell, and then never succeed again. You might be offered rewards on a silver platter, even as a rug is being simultaneously pulled out from under you. You might be adored for a while, then go out of fashion.

Other, dumber people might take your place as critical darlings.

The patron goddess of creative success can sometimes seem like a rich, capricious old lady who lives in a giant mansion on a distant hill and who makes really weird decisions about who gets her fortune. She sometimes rewards charlatans and ignores the gifted. She cuts people out of her will who loyally served her for their entire lives, and then gives a Mercedes to that cute boy who cut her lawn once. She changes her mind about things. We try to divine her motives, but they remain occult. She is never obliged to explain herself to us. In short, the goddess of creative success may show up for you, or she may not. Probably best, then, if you don't count on her, or attach your definition of personal happiness to her whims.

Maybe better to reconsider your definition of success, period.

For my own part, I decided early on to focus on my devotion to the work above all. That would be how I measured my worth. I knew that conventional success would depend upon three factors—talent, luck, and discipline—and I knew that two of those three things would never be under my control. Genetic randomness had already determined how much talent I'd been allotted, and destiny's

randomness would account for my share of luck. The only piece I had any control over was my discipline. Recognizing that, it seemed like the best plan would be to work my ass off. That was the only card I had to play, so I played it hard.

Mind you, hard work guarantees *nothing* in realms of creativity. (Nothing guarantees anything in realms of creativity.) But I cannot help but think that devotional discipline is the best approach. Do what you love to do, and do it with both seriousness and lightness. At least then you will know that you have tried and that—whatever the outcome—you have traveled a noble path.

I have a friend, an aspiring musician, whose sister said to her one day, quite reasonably, “What happens if you never get anything out of this? What happens if you pursue your passion forever, but success never comes? How will you feel then, having wasted your entire life for nothing?”

My friend, with equal reason, replied, “If you can’t see what I’m *already* getting out of this, then I’ll never be able to explain it to you.”

When it’s for love, you will always do it anyhow.

Career vs. Vocation

It is for these reasons (the difficulty, the unpredictability) that I have always discouraged people from approaching creativity as a career move, and I always will—because, with rare exceptions, creative fields make for crap careers. (They make for crap careers, that is, if you define a “career” as something that provides for you financially in a fair and foreseeable manner, which is a pretty reasonable definition of a career.)

Even if things work out for you in the arts, parts of your career will likely always remain crap. You might not like your publisher, or your gallerist, or your drummer, or your cinematographer. You might hate your tour schedule, or your more aggressive fans, or your critics. You might resent answering the same questions over and over again in interviews. You might be constantly annoyed at yourself for always falling short of your own aspirations. Trust me, if you want to complain, you’ll always find plenty to complain about, even when fortune appears to be shining her favor upon you.

But creative living can be an amazing *vocation*, if you have the love and courage and persistence to see it that

way. I suggest that this may be the only sanity-preserving way to approach creativity. Because nobody ever told us it would be easy, and uncertainty is what we sign up for when we say that we want to live creative lives.

Everyone is panicking these days, for instance, about how much the Internet and digital technology are changing the creative world. Everyone is fretting over whether there will still be jobs and money available for artists going forward into this volatile new age. But allow me to point out that—long before the Internet and digital technology ever existed—the arts were still a crap career. It's not like back in 1989 anybody was saying to me, "You know where the money is, kid? *Writing!*" They weren't saying that to anyone back in 1889, either, or in 1789, and they won't be saying it in 2089. But people will still try to be writers, because they love the vocation. People will keep being painters, sculptors, musicians, actors, poets, directors, quilters, knitters, potters, glassblowers, metalworkers, ceramists, calligraphers, collagists, nail artists, clog dancers, and Celtic harpists, as well. Against all sound advice, people will stubbornly keep trying to make pleasing things for no particularly good reason, as we always have done.

Is it sometimes a difficult path? Sure.

Does it make for an interesting life? The most.

Will the inevitable difficulties and obstacles associated

with creativity make you suffer? That part—cross my heart—is entirely up to you.

Elk Talk

Let me tell you a story about persistence and patience. Back in my early twenties, I wrote a short story called "Elk Talk." The tale had grown out of an experience I'd had back when I was working as a cook on a ranch in Wyoming. One evening, I had stayed up late telling jokes and drinking beer with a few of the cowboys. These guys were all hunters, and we got to talking about elk calls—the various techniques for imitating a bull elk's mating call in order to draw the animals near. One of the cowboys, Hank, admitted that he had recently purchased a tape recording of some elk calls made by the greatest master of elk-calling in elk-hunting history, a guy named (and I will never forget this) Larry D. Jones.

For some reason—it might have been the beer—I thought this was the funniest thing I'd ever heard. I loved that there was somebody in the world named Larry D. Jones who made a living by recording himself imitating mating calls of elks, and I loved that people like my friend

Hank bought these tapes in order to practice their own mating calls. I persuaded Hank to go find the Larry D. Jones instructional mating-call tape, and I made him play it for me again and again while I laughed myself dizzy. It wasn't just the sound of the elk call that I found hilarious (it's an eardrum-shredding Styrofoam-against-Styrofoam screech); I also loved the earnest twang of Larry D. Jones droning on and on about how to do it correctly. I found the whole thing to be comedy gold.

Then somehow (again, the beer may have played a role) I got this idea that Hank and I should go try it out—that we should stumble into the woods in the middle of the night with a boom box and the Larry D. Jones tape, just to see what would happen. So we did. We were drunk and giddy and loud as we thrashed through the Wyoming mountains. Hank carried the boom box on his shoulder and turned up the volume as high as he could, while I kept falling over laughing at the loud, artificial sound of a bull elk in rut—interspersed with Larry D. Jones's droning voice—blasting through our surroundings.

We could not have been less in tune with nature at that moment, but nature found us anyway. All at once there was a thunder of hooves (I'd never heard an actual thunder of hooves before; it's terrifying) and then a crashing of branches, and then the biggest elk you ever saw exploded

into our clearing and stood there in the moonlight, just a few short yards from us, snorting and pawing at the ground and tossing his antlered head in fury: *What rival male has dared to bugle a mating call on my turf?*

Suddenly, Larry D. Jones didn't seem so funny anymore.

Never have two people sobered up as fast as Hank and I sobered up right then. We'd been kidding, but this seven-hundred-pound beast was decidedly not kidding. He was ready for war. It was as if we'd been conducting a harmless little séance, but had inadvertently summoned forth an actual dangerous spirit. We'd been messing around with forces that should not be messed with, and we were not worthy.

My impulse was to bow down before the elk, trembling, and to beg for mercy. Hank's impulse was smarter—to throw the boom box as far away from us as he could, as if it were about to detonate (anything to distance ourselves from the bogus voice that we had dragged into this all-too-real forest). We cowered behind a boulder. We gawped at the elk in wonder while it blew clouds of frosty breath, furiously looking for its rival, tearing up the earth beneath its hooves. When you see the face of God, it is meant to frighten you, and this magnificent creature had frightened us in exactly that manner.

When the elk finally departed, we inched our way back

to the ranch, feeling humbled and shaken and very mortal. It was *awesome*—in the classical definition of the word.

So I wrote about it. I didn't tell this exact story, but I wanted to catch hold of that sensation ("callow humans humbled by divine natural visitation") and use it as the basis for writing something serious and intense about man and nature. I wanted to take that electrifying personal experience and work it into a piece of short fiction using imagined characters. It took me many months to get that story right—or at least to get it as close to right as I possibly could, for my age and abilities. When I finished writing the story, I called it "Elk Talk." Then I started sending it out to magazines, hoping somebody would publish it.

One of the publications that I sent "Elk Talk" to was the late, great fiction journal *Story*. Many of my literary heroes—Cheever, Caldwell, Salinger, Heller—had been published there over the decades, and I wanted to be in those pages, too. A few weeks later, my inevitable rejection letter arrived in the post. But this was a really special rejection letter.

You have to understand that rejection letters come in varying degrees, ranging across the full spectrum of the word *no*. There is not only the boilerplate form rejection letter; there is also the boilerplate rejection letter with a tiny personal note scrawled on the bottom, in an actual

human's handwriting, which might say something like, *Interesting, but not for us!* It can be exhilarating to receive even such a sparse crumb of recognition, and many times in my youth I'd been known to run around crowing to my friends, "I just got the most *amazing* rejection note!"

But this particular rejection letter was from *Story's* well-respected editor in chief, Lois Rosenthal herself. Her response was thoughtful and encouraging. Ms. Rosenthal liked the story, she wrote. She tended to like stories about animals better than stories about people. Ultimately, however, she felt that the ending fell short. Therefore, she would not be publishing it. But she wished me good luck.

To an unpublished writer, getting rejected as nicely as that—from the editor in chief herself!—is almost like winning the Pulitzer. I was elated. It was by far the most fantastic rejection I'd ever received. And then I did what I used to do all the time back then: I took that rejected short story out of its self-addressed stamped envelope and sent it off to another magazine to collect yet another rejection letter—maybe an even better one. Because that is how you play the game. Onward ever, backward never.

A few years passed. I kept working at my day jobs and writing on the side. I finally did get published—with a different short story, in a different magazine. Because of that lucky break, I was now able to get a professional literary

agent. Now it was my agent, Sarah, who sent my work out to publishers on my behalf. (No more photocopying for me; my agent had her own photocopier!) A few months into our relationship, Sarah called me with lovely news: My old short story "Elk Talk" was going to be published.

"Wonderful," I said. "Who bought it?"

"*Story* magazine," she reported. "Lois Rosenthal loved it."

Huh.

Interesting.

A few days later, I had a phone conversation with Lois herself, who could not have been kinder. She told me that she thought "Elk Talk" was perfect, and that she couldn't wait to publish it.

"You even liked the ending?" I asked.

"Of course," she said. "I adore the ending."

As we spoke, I was holding in my hands the very rejection letter she had written me just a few years earlier about this same story. Clearly, she had no recollection of ever having read "Elk Talk" before. I didn't bring it up. I was delighted that she was embracing my work, and I didn't want to seem disrespectful, snarky, or ungrateful. But I certainly was curious, so I asked, "What is it that you like about my story, if you don't mind telling me?"

She said, "It's so evocative. It feels mythical. It reminds

me of something, but I can't quite put my finger on what . . ."

I knew better than to say, "It reminds you of *itself*."

The Beautiful Beast

So how do we interpret this tale?

The cynical interpretation would be "This is unequivocal evidence that the world is a place of deep unfairness."

Because look at the facts: Lois Rosenthal didn't want "Elk Talk" when it was submitted to her by an unknown author, but she did want it when it was submitted to her by a famous literary agent. Therefore: It's not what you know, it's who you know. Talent means nothing, and connections mean everything, and the world of creativity—like the greater world itself—is a mean and unfair place.

If you want to see it that way, go right ahead.

But I didn't see it that way. On the contrary, I saw it as another example of Big Magic—and, again, a witty one. I saw it as proof that you must never surrender, that no doesn't always mean *no*, and that miraculous turns of fate can happen to those who persist in showing up.

Also, just try to imagine how many short stories a day Lois Rosenthal was reading back in the early 1990s. (I've seen slush piles at magazines; picture a tower of manila envelopes stacked up to the sky.) We all like to think that our work is original and unforgettable, but surely it must all run together after a certain point—even the animal-themed stories. Moreover, I don't know what kind of mood Lois was in when she read "Elk Talk" the first time. She might have read it at the end of a long day, or after an argument with a colleague, or just before she had to drive to the airport to pick up a relative she wasn't looking forward to seeing. I don't know what sort of mood she was in when she read it for the second time, either. Maybe she'd just come back from a restorative vacation. Maybe she'd just received elating news: A loved one didn't have cancer, after all! Who knows? All I do know is that, when Lois Rosenthal read my short story for the second time, it echoed in her consciousness and sang out to her. But that echo was only in her mind because *I had planted it there*, several years earlier, by sending her my story in the first place. And also because I had stayed in the game, even after the initial rejection.

This event also taught me that these people—the ones who stand at the gates of our dreams—are not automatons. They are just *people*. They are just like us. They are whim-

sical and quirky. They're a little different every day, just as you and I are a little different every day. There is no neat template that can ever predict what will capture any one person's imagination, or when; you just have to reach them at the right moment. But since the right moment is unknowable, you must maximize your chances. Play the odds. Put yourself forward in stubborn good cheer, and then do it again and again and again . . .

The effort is worth it, because when at last you do connect, it is an otherworldly delight of the highest order. Because this is how it feels to lead the faithful creative life: You try and try and try, and nothing works. But you keep trying, and you keep seeking, and then sometimes, in the least expected place and time, it finally happens. You make the connection. Out of nowhere, it all comes together. Making art does sometimes feel like you're holding a séance, or like you're calling out in the night for a wild animal on the prowl. What you're doing seems impossible and even silly, but then you hear the thunder of hooves, and some beautiful beast comes rushing into the glade, searching for you just as urgently as you have been searching for it.

So you must keep trying. You must keep calling out in those dark woods for your own Big Magic. You must search tirelessly and faithfully, hoping against hope to someday

experience that divine collision of creative communion—either for the first time, or one more time.

Because when it all comes together, it's amazing. When it all comes together, the only thing you can do is bow down in gratitude, as if you have been granted an audience with the divine.

Because you have.

Lastly, This

Many years ago, my uncle Nick went to see the eminent American writer Richard Ford give a talk at a bookstore in Washington, DC. During the Q&A after the reading, a middle-aged man in the audience stood up and said something like this:

"Mr. Ford, you and I have much in common. Just like you, I have been writing short stories and novels my whole life. You and I are about the same age, from the same background, and we write about the same themes. The only difference is that you have become a celebrated man of letters, and I—despite decades of effort—have never been published. This is heartbreaking to me. My spirit has been

crushed by all the rejection and disappointment. I wonder if you have any advice for me. But please, sir, whatever you do, don't just tell me to persevere, because that's the only thing people ever tell me to do, and hearing that only makes me feel worse."

Now, I wasn't there. And I don't know Richard Ford personally. But according to my uncle, who is a good reporter, Ford replied, "Sir, I am sorry for your disappointment. Please believe me, I would never insult you by simply telling you to persevere. I can't even imagine how discouraging that would be to hear, after all these years of rejection. In fact, I will tell you something else—something that may surprise you. I'm going to tell you to quit."

The audience froze: What kind of encouragement was this?

Ford went on: "I say this to you only because writing is clearly bringing you no pleasure. It is only bringing you pain. Our time on earth is short and should be enjoyed. You should leave this dream behind and go find something else to do with your life. Travel, take up new hobbies, spend time with your family and friends, relax. But don't write anymore, because it's obviously killing you."

There was a long silence.

Then Ford smiled and added, almost as an afterthought:

BIG MAGIC

“However, I will say this. If you happen to discover, after a few years away from writing, that you have found nothing that takes its place in your life—nothing that fascinates you, or moves you, or inspires you to the same degree that writing once did . . . well, then, sir, I’m afraid you will have no choice but to persevere.”