

STEP AWAY FROM THE PUNCHBOWL AND REACH FOR THE FABULOUSNESS

by Jody Reale

The pickle is that I'm a "creative type," which, I've decided, is a kinder way of defending my lifestyle than disclosing that I spent some time as a toddler eating paint chips. I reminisce. So I'm a writer, a career that I launched simply by openly admitting that that's what I loved doing the most. I'm a writer now because I've always been one—and because working at home alone allows me to consider masturbation an office romance.

I "came out" with my chosen profession sometime around what I refuse to call Y2K, both events eliciting in friends and family a mixed grill of excitement and the kind of hysteria usually reserved for outbreaks of flesh-eating bacteria epidemics. "You can't be a writer," someone protested, "you don't even smoke!" It's true. I have few vices; my closest friends have fewer, but my trusty support system testified that anything was possible, my friend Shawn Marie going so far as to testify that, "I've seen dogs play Frisbee."

Sexual fringe benefits and emotional nourishment notwithstanding, writing meets my main vocational criterion: When I'm catching up with relatives at a wedding or funeral, my explanation of what I do takes only a few words and allows me to move on to the buffet before questioning begins.

I'm a writer now, Aunt Tillie. How's your psoriasis?

And still, writing's been a tough road to hoe; I have good days and bad days, but I'm reluctant to quit, if for no other reason than I've now told so many people that I am a writer that I can't give up now without looking like a flake. The encouragement I've received, I'm convinced, is a manifestation of compassion and sympathy, the first instance of which I encountered when a very kind woman named Rhonda told me I was, "Too legit to quit." She earned extra points as far as I was concerned for referencing a lyric by the rapper MC Hammer.

I entered this foreign pursuit the only way I knew how without going back to school: I agreed to commit myself to the simple act of writing. And despite the daily discomfort of gambling everything on a long shot, I feel like I've finally taken the first step in conquering my occupational problems by admitting that I have the solution. I spent my working life filling my proverbial dance cards with prospects that I hoped were "good catches," if only on paper. Who knew that the Internet bubble could and would burst, dashing my dreams of millions overnight?

It's during conversations about life and livelihood that my mom will use a quote that's wise and reflective and unconditionally supportive—if primitive—like, "You've got to dance with the one that brung ya." Forget that she'll then try and convince me to become a flight attendant; she's still right about keeping the earnest promises we make to ourselves, especially the ones you made while other people happened to be listening. I came to my prom with writing, like it or not, and at some point I'm going to have to step away from the punchbowl and fulfill my date-ly obligations, which may or may not

include undressing and re-dressing in a two-door coupe. There's a chance that if I just relax and start with a simple box step for the sheer fun of it, our ever-improving steps might make me glad I showed up. It's possible; I too have seen dogs leap ten vertical feet off the ground, turn their slobbering grins 180, and snatch a Frisbee out of the sky.

But even the most inspiring anecdotes and visualizations tire after daily—or hourly—application. When I'm certain that not even God (or the non-denominational, cross-cultural spiritual substitute) is pulling for me, I need more than a phrase that tells me my thinking is stinking or to take things one day at a time. I need grander props, specifically a feather boa and a martini, darling. It's during these desperate times that I reach for the fabulousness.

I may never be famous or—even better—infamous. Maybe strangers will squeal over having the same birthday as mine, maybe they won't, but I keep plucking along between fantasies about a life of privilege anyway. These fantasies have become my constant companion, a habit. And this habit I've adopted, of distracting myself with stardom, this fabulousness habit, keeps me heartened enough to resist the temptation to crawl under the bed sheets with a box of strawberry Pop Tarts.

Fabulousness waives away those whispers that imply I have sacrificed too much. Fabulousness and its limos and personal assistant named Dante fortify my shriveling courage in the face of risk. There is no old white guy in a lab coat with spreadsheets and bar graphs and Power Point presentations on the proven method for going from zero to *Oprah* in sixty minutes. Despite the looming specter of failure—and worse, embarrassment—somehow writing will save me. It's complicated.

October 14, 2000: I marry Alex, a good-hearted fellow whom, when partying with his friends, makes me wonder if it's too late to switch teams. When I am out with him and his drunken band of Men Without Wives, he reminds me that I am piercing the veil into the secret lives of men. I first feign wonderment and then remind him—again—that there is no secret, that it's the Emperor's new veil, that there is no male mystique. Alex, the man who parted with personal information that inspired his friends to make reference to my lady parts during casual conversation couldn't keep a secret from Helen Keller.

His most notable tendency, though, is proclaiming that we can afford elegant new cars and resort homes one day, and filling out the change of address form that lists our next residence as “Appliance Box” the next. He does his best to understand that, as a writer, I have taken vows of seclusion, cynicism and government cheese. And although utterly confused by my daily lifestyle and me, his fabulousness enabling is touching. So when he says that he wants me to have my chance at having/doing something extraordinary, I consider tolerating his frat-boyish ways as payments toward my debt of gratitude to him. Just before my 33rd birthday, I discovered his plan to surprise me with a Mercedes, and thus the distant bounds of his fabulousness devotion.

“How in the world are you going to buy me a Mercedes?” I asked him. “And do you have any idea how many other things I need infinitely more than *a car*, much less *a Mercedes*?”

Driving a Mercedes would symbolize the level of irony every other aspect of my life embodies, I suppose, but I steered my better half away. This is not to say that I don't

want a Mercedes or its equally decadent automotive equivalent. I do. Desperately, and out of greed and spite, mostly—ever since the time some dumb cow made fun of my small, old, reliable Toyota in front of me. It clearly was insecure, keeping-up-with-the-Jones’ blather, which makes that woman an ass, but it took me off my game for a week or so, which makes me just as much of a git.

Sometimes the lure of a normal life is nearly irresistible, prompting phone calls to very understanding friends in the middle of the night to report that I’ve had it with the artistic, the unconventional. That in the morning I’m going to apply for a job at the hardware store, or the bank. My friends mumble their empathy, for they see these late-night normal job/normal life conspiracies for what they are—thinly veiled substitutes for a security blanket and thumb. It works; I grow drowsy and hang up after ten minutes, and forget the whole plan before I rise the next day sometime around noon.

Someday, Dante will smooth things to an even keel by paying the utilities bill long before the lights go out. He will drive me to my appointments on time, singing backup vocals to my lead with the Prince CD that’s turned up loud the whole way there. When I am out of town, he will take my dogs to yoga. He will not laugh when I incorporate a long, black cigarette holder into my accessories rotation. In fact, he will encourage me to hold it pinched between thumb and middle finger, palm up. “You look real classy,” he’ll dote. Most importantly, when I collapse on a stark Broadway stage at a lonely microphone, exhausted from giving my all and living hard on the road, Dante will sprint to my limp body under the spotlight from stage left and effortlessly scoop me up, seemingly in slow motion. With fat tears sliding off his MAC foundation, he’ll wail into

the squealing microphone, “Is there a doctor in the house?” He will drop to his knees.

“Damn it, is there a doctor?”

December 2000: During a visit to New York City, a family friend says she will treat a group of us to a fancy dinner and a show. I enthusiastically choose *Dirty Blond*, a lesser-known-than-*Cats* Broadway production written by and starring Claudia Shear, “Who is,” I gushed pre-show, “a genius.” Once seated in the Helen Hays Theater, a well-meaning companion leans into me, pointing to my program, and ever so carefully enunciates, “This is called a *Play-bill*. There’s one for every show, see?”

Waiting for fabulousness makes these episodes palatable until I can exploit them in a Broadway show of my own, until actual fame razes the rules and rebuilds them in my favor. I will never, ever again attend a job interview during which the interviewer dismisses me because I’m a “job-hopper.” I will use my fame and power responsibly. I will not say boorish things to a person and then pardon my own insensitivity with, “I’m just so honest. I’m such a blunt, real person.”

“Instead of a Mercedes, how about some towels for my birthday? Gosh, I’d love new towels...” My voice trailed off as I imagined the divine pleasure of drying myself with something designed and constructed with just that purpose in mind. I could stop rubbing up against one—or better—both of the dogs upon exiting the shower. “I can’t remember the last time I bought a towel...”

I want something pigmented, not bleached within an inch of cheesecloth, something that matches, say, the toilet brush cozy that I also aspire to one day own. A towel that doesn’t proclaim in proud black Sharpie down one or all of its margins what

health club owned it before I stole it. O, towels and all the other common and wonderful trappings of a very good, very ordinary life.

Which I may have to admit I am always going to live: An ordinary life, as an ordinary person. Just Jane Doe, that's me. Hanging out here at home in Anywhere, USA with the rest of the plain old folks. There are no fancy hotel rooms to trash on a violent whim. I do not have God on speed dial—I don't even have speed dial. No one will ever ask me what I'm wearing to the Academy Awards, or wearing to the grocery store, for that matter. I am not asked to guest host *The Tonight Show*, or even *Wake Up, Tuscaloosa!* Here I am, a civilian, a layperson, giving up the ghost. The closest I will get to stardom is phoning in a PBS membership pledge at the same moment the camera pans to the volunteer who happens to have me on the phone.

Reality has just pulled into town, and it's saying, in the nicest possible way, "Look Hon, it's been a while and that carrot ain't getting any closer. You took your shot at something big and you missed. You did your best, now shut up about it and start a tax-deferred retirement account while you're still young."

When I hear these messages, I smile a little. Imagine everyone's surprise when I take over the world. Dante, be a doll and hold all my calls; Reality and I can do coffee after the press corps leaves.

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