

On Not Being Virginia Woolf

1.

I say to my husband, "I'm worried about my writing." He doesn't miss a beat: "What writing?" It's half question, half statement. That is all.

Indeed. *What* writing?

2.

It's late. My husband and I are standing in the kitchen, which is lit only by a small bulb above the stove. I can tell he's tired, but I'm hungry for conversation after being with two semi-verbal people all day. I ask questions and drop provocative lines until I entice him into talking about child rearing via his two chief weaknesses: travel and art.

"If you need to be polite in order to raise a polite child," Andrew philosophizes, "then it stands to reason that to have adventurous children, you need to be adventurous yourself. To have creative children, they need to see you creating. So we've got to get 'em out of here; get them messy with paint. And keep feeding them stuff they *think* they don't like. Because they will."

He moves away from the counter and opens the fridge. The liberated light leaps across the kitchen walls before he grabs another bottle of Rolling Rock and closes the door. "Bottom line: our kids need to see us creating our own stuff."

I groan. It seems easy for my husband to say this. His creative life is his play; he doesn't make a living from it. The music and photographs he makes are interactive, the kids his eager collaborators. Bella already has her own camera, a hand-me-down held together with duct tape. But she can't yet write, the alphabet is barely coming into focus.

I, on the other hand, write out of my children's sight, beyond the reach of their tiny hands that hunt and peck at the keyboard until screens I've never seen before pop up and freak me out. *But where did mama's article go?* I write in our attic or in coffee shops. My writing must seem to them an imaginary act.

His face now completely lost in the dark, Andrew dreams aloud about taking the kids hiking in the Pacific Northwest, living in Kenya, building the mother of all tree houses. He's warmed to the subject, but I'm only half-listening. I am plotting tomorrow's dinner and totaling bills that need to be paid.

3.

When I was pregnant with my daughter, hugely pregnant, my husband and a friend hefted my desk out of what had been my study but would soon be her bedroom. It was a lovely

Jennifer New
1530 Sheridan Ave.
Iowa City, IA 52240
jkn@jennifernew.com
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desk: wide and sturdy with deep drawers and pullout writing wings on either side. After writing my first book at it, the desk had taken on anthropomorphic qualities. It was imposing, weighty, and powerful. Behind it, I was too.

I would not let the desk be demoted. Babies can sleep in closets or dresser drawers, I thought. (Similarly, I reassured our dog of her place in the family hierarchy.) But when Bella arrived, my promises and determination evaporated. I was so smitten that I would have given her every inch of our house, every ounce of my flesh, all of my time.

Virginia Woolf I was not.

The only place for the desk to go was smack in the living room. Every time we had people for dinner, there was my desk sharing the space with coffee and dessert. It appears hunkered in the background of holiday and birthday photos, a functional object stripped of its magical aura. Its place was like mine: in the absolute center of our home. Not some Grecian pillar, beautifully sculpted and aligned, but plain and essential to the well being of the rest of the structure; it was what you would call load bearing.

When we moved to a larger house, I sold the desk. My writerly trappings went up to the attic, including a lithe Ikea table without any history. I was just where I'd longed to be: apart from the chaos of our house. Alone. So why did I feel like the mad woman in the attic?

4.

I cut the photo from the front page of the local paper in the midst of a cold snap. I described it to a lot of people, assuming that everyone would recognize its dead-on absurdity. Looking back, I doubt any of them did.

The woman's face fills the frame. She's pulled the hood of her fur-lined parka tight against the frigid January air. Large dark glasses reflect the glare of the sun. A hiss of breath escapes her lips. The caption, meant to elucidate, provides only questions: "Between raising three young children, Judy Ferris, takes time out to study Mandarin."

Why Mandarin? An impossible language that allows you to speak with people on the other side of the planet. And is there such a thing as *between raising three young children*? There is no between, no space, no moment of reprieve when a sippy cup isn't being demanded, or a small, plastic doll not underfoot. And if such a reprieve existed, why wouldn't Ms. Ferris be in the bathtub breathing deeply, or on the next plane to Aruba? There is also, of course, the unmentioned visual text: the hood and sunglasses suggest a disguise. Or perhaps they are protection against the bitter elements, as though enough layers might defend her from mothering.

It is, I believe, the most perfect commentary on motherhood I've seen.

5.

Bella sits in her highchair finishing dinner. I'm on the sofa nursing Tobey. Andrew paces the room talking on the phone. I'm listening to an animated conversation Bella is having with someone (and it does seem to be a *someone*, not just herself). After laughing at her own joke—*my, I'm witty!*—she turns to introduce us to her invisible friend. “Tobey,” she begins (since his birth two months ago, he is always first). “Hannah,” she continues, pointing toward our much neglected brown lab sprawled at my feet. “Andrew!” she sings, excited to use my husband's name. We're not sure how or why she adopted this, but she uses his name frequently these days.

Then she stops. I'm staring right at her, smiling encouragingly. But nothing. I wave at her and feel a bit pathetic.

There's a long pause, during which Andrew rattles off a URL, the dog sighs, and Tobey gurgles. Finally. “Mama!”

6.

Walking into Megan's house, I breathe in the quiet air, which is more revitalizing than the cold lemonade she greets me with. Though I am here to talk with my friend, I suddenly find myself mute. Rather than chatting, I long to savor the library-silence of the shady room. Would it be rude to ask Megan to leave me alone for a bit?

I find my way to a chair at her kitchen table and feel my spine lengthen, vertebrae by vertebrae. I think of how my back feels most nights at dinner: rounded and tensed like a cat's from crouching on the edge of my chair, ready to leap up for the random cries or requests that punctuate each meal.

It's been awhile since my friend and I have seen each other, and when we finally get down to the business of reconnecting, we grope a bit to find the path through the rocky terrain that can separate those with children and those without. I often don't talk about my kids with her. I never cared for hearing about other people's kids when I was among the non-parental. But also, I need a respite from them.

She talks about her teaching work, and I scan the room, struck again by its stillness. There is no clutter, though with its neat stacks of magazines and books the house is hardly antiseptic. The hushed rooms feel cleansing, a deep, cool pool that I could float in effortlessly. Most amazing of all are the floors, smooth and shiny with their lack of toast crumbs, dog hair, and strewn toys. I want to lie down on the wooden planks. A monk's bed of solitude and contemplation.

If I had these floors, I could write. It's not about money or time, I see now, but clean floors which hold the secret to creative power.

7.

I need to get through the grocery shopping as quickly as possible, but with my cart still empty I can't resist the magazine rack. Just a moment to gaze at other people's neat, well-lit lives.

In a popular magazine that tells how to live a more simple existence, I read an essay by a successful writer about her woes balancing motherhood and craft. Her husband jets about on business and is rarely home. Her daughter is needy in the ways children are. Hiring babysitters is a never-ending, time-consuming, balancing act. The writer feels unfocused, unable to get anything done well because her life is so fragmented.

Except for the deadbeat, jet-setting dad, I'm right there rooting for this woman. Yeah, I say aloud right there between the Chinese carryout steam table and the video rental line, tell it like it is! Ain't that the truth?!

But then I come to the denouement. *Dear reader*, she tells us, *I fixed this stressful problem by hiring a live-in nanny. Now I can work as much as I need to and see my daughter whenever I want. Why didn't I think of this before?*

Indeed! And why didn't you mention that you could afford a live-in nanny a few paragraphs up? Why write this piece at all? Because it certainly doesn't strike me as a simple solution, certainly not reflective of the Average Jane's options. I stuff the magazine back into the rack, not caring when I bend the cover.

I'm still muttering to myself with disgust as I schlep the contents of my cart onto the check-out counter and watch the bananas and paper towels roll by. *Nanny? My ass!*

8.

I go to yoga—stretch, breathe, relax—and think about my children. I swim, lap after lap with the smell of chlorine filling my nose, and the luscious warmth of the summer sun on my back. I think about my children.

My husband and I go to a movie, a real floozy of Hollywood sentimentality, handkerchiefs all around. I'm crying too, but not about the lame horse. I'm crying about my children. What if *they* have to live through the next Depression? What if one of them breaks a leg and never walks again? What if they routinely come to this stupid mall when they're teenagers? All of this makes me cry.

At night, I dream about my children. We're playing with clay. We're in the ocean. My daughter is combing my hair.

I write an article about a school in Alabama. It is work I was hired to do long before my son was born. It's a paycheck. And yet I love the *process*. I am trying to capture a high

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1530 Sheridan Ave.
Iowa City, IA 52240
jkn@jennifernew.com
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school English teacher whose press-your-ear-to-the-phone, lilting accent belies the eloquent venom she is dispensing about the local school board that closed her tiny, rural school.

Sliding my finger over the laptop's mouse, I copy and paste chunks of text, trying a phrase here and then there. Every word, every comma can shift the meaning and tone. I love this about writing. It makes me feel like a tennis player; let's see what happens when, TWHACK, I send the ball this way? The game immerses me.

I am not thinking about my children. I am writing.