

It's simply not a problem for me, she said.

Not a problem? I turned up the volume against the whacking of the windshield wipers. Whoever she was, I could use some advice. My productivity was so low—maybe a few short stories a year—I'd begun to doubt I was a writer. I might simply be a teacher. Those who can't... The background music tinkled.

I never run out of ideas or words, she added.

So I had been fooling myself about being a writer. Real writers don't run out of ideas or words.

He said, *But a novel every year...*

A novel every year? How?

"...for the last ten years. He sounded a lot like the long-dead **Studs Terkel**, insinuating and mocking, implying that she churned them out. Maybe she did. She must. Okay, I could learn something from a prolific hack. Trying to write deeply and well, I was never going to be able to write a novel, which I'd failed to even start for the past four years.

Two novels last year. She corrected. Her smirk was audible.

That's right. Let me... Papers rustled as Studs-wannabe tried to regain his footing.

It's hard to keep up with me, she laughed.



The gurgle of wine being poured and the happy glissando of piano keys. Had this been recorded in a cocktail lounge? I hoped so. I wiped a clear patch in the fog accumulating on the windshield and pictured a dark club, sometime in the 1950s, couples sitting at small tables, an old smoothy at the keyboard covering Sinatra classics. To write two novels a year and hang out in cocktail lounges: a dream.

A minivan swerved into my lane. I missed what they said next, tamping down my adrenaline.

Can you tell us about your working routine?

Please, advice. Any at all.

I get home from work around six.

A regular nine-to-fiver? My job was heavy-duty constant pressure—teaching three college courses per term is not the easeful stroll that outsiders think—but it wasn't 40 hours a week chained to a desk. I worked from home one day a week, had two months off in the summer, yet it was as much as I could do to complete two, maybe three, stories a year.

The novel I'd told others I was writing was a mere urge, nothing more. If a nine-to-fiver could knock out a novel a year, what was I doing wrong?

I kick off my shoes, and first thing, pour a glass of wine.

So: no kids. Wine swirled in a glass. In the background, a poignant tune I almost recognized. A long drag on a cigarette—a checkmark in the plus column for me; I didn't smoke. I wished the interviewer would say her name, or at least mention one of her titles.

I need to keep a buffer between my work-a-day mind and my creative mind, so I take a shower before I start.

Buffer. I needed a buffer. Tell the kids not to knock on my door unless they are bleeding. Tell my boss not to saddle me with stupid make-work. Tell my students not to email me with their wheedling demands. Quit writing stories with holes in them. Stop with the stories and start my novel. And tell my husband to bring home dinner.

After my shower, I sit at my desk, which I keep immaculate. Nothing is on my desk except a lamp, my laptop, and a note with the last sentence I wrote the night before.

Clean up my desk. Another hour of not writing, but after that...

The note is all I use to jog my memory. I never look at what I've already written. That would slow me down, all that reading. Then I start writing. Another drag on her cigarette. A page a day. That's what I write. No more, no less. Then I hit "save," print out the page, and put it face down in my manuscript box. I like to see the actual pages mount up. A growing stack of pages. I would like that too. Three pages would equal a flash piece. Fifteen pages, a short story. Fifty to seventy-five pages, a novella. Three hundred pages... The car behind me honked. I'd slowed to a crawl. An hour a day. Rarely more.

One hour a day? How hard would that be?

...and after a year, I have a 365 page novel.

A novel in a year.

Then I get dressed for the evening and go out.

Wait. Out?

It's important for a writer to be immersed in life.

I was immersed in life. Rambunctious kids, a teaching job with an unrelenting boss and tedious committee work, a harried husband with a demanding career, too—but this was no longer the stuff of novels. The terrain I occupied had been exhausted in the middle of the last century by all those writers I admired. What I needed was a more exciting life to be immersed in.

What about revisions?

Yes, what about revisions? I couldn't write a grocery list without revisions.

She made a soft exasperated sound. She'd had just about enough of Studs-wannabe's petty questions.

As you know, a 365-page novel is too long. After I get to the end, I go back and cut until I get it under 300 pages, maybe 280, because who has the time to read these days?

He cleared his throat and rustled papers. *By revision, I mean something beyond cutting words. I mean—*

That's what being a professional is all about. The sound of a cigarette being stubbed out. *I get it right from word one.*

Right from word one? Amazing. As I tried to absorb this fact, my cell phone rang. The babysitter. Where was I? She didn't say "hell" because my kids were clamoring in the background. My son got on the phone. His little sister had destroyed his intergalactic space station and I needed to punish her. By the time I'd promised to take care of everything when I got home and clicked off, a new voice on the radio was crowing about the traffic-snarling effects of the unseasonal snow. The interview in the cocktail lounge was over, and I had not learned the name of this Amazonian writer, or even the title of one of her books. I turned off the recitation of blocked roads and accidents. I would check the online program guide later. She had given me my instructions, but I needed her name. She would be my lodestar as I created a buffer, cleaned my desk, wrote a page a day, and got it right from word one. I could do that. I would do that.

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After the kids were in bed, after I talked to my husband on the phone, after I printed out the lecture notes for my next class, I pulled up the radio station's web page.



From the vault, Studs Terkel's April Fools show.

I'd been punked. I'm not sure whether I was more upset about being so gullible or about my vision of the pristine stack of pages collapsing.

Collapsing, as had every other piece of advice I'd ever taken about the writing life. Rise early. Write in a dream-state. Write late. Grab moments. Drink booze. Drink coffee. Don't drink anything until a thousand words are on the page. Keep a journal. Learn Latin before beginning. Create character studies before writing. Outline. Polish every word before moving on to the next. Write to THE END before looking back. Free write. End each writing session in the middle of a sentence. Notecards. Notebooks. Dictate.

I've always been eager for advice. Those who have gone before can point the way; I believe that. I've followed the words of writing teachers, and of writers I venerate. A few times I've found a strategy that worked, for a while. Then it didn't. At first I thought this was because I lacked what my grandmother called "stick-to-itiveness." But as I've stumbled along—writing stories, starting several novels, finishing one—I've come to believe that the fault isn't in me and it isn't in the advice. It's that life is complicated, our responsibilities are many, what's expected of us changes, and we have to be agile and responsive to flux.

The one tactic that works for me is to remind myself that writing is meaningful to me. When job and family, friends and compelling things eat into my days, I remind myself that writing is meaningful. That's it. Without it I suffer.

Holding that thought, I find the time to write and give it prominence in my life. That's a piece of advice I would give others: remember that writing matters to you.

Sometimes late at night when the house is quiet and my work is done, I reach across my messy desk to click off the lamp and imagine slipping out to a dark cabaret where champagne corks pop, smart talk soars, and the piano player never stops. And on the desk I've left behind are stacked pages of perfect prose.



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