

Joy Through Strength in the Bardo

Sally George

This morning I saw a beautiful woman walking behind me. I was going to work through a neighborhood of factories and garages, tired, slumping cold and heavy inside my mouse-colored coat; my mouse-colored hair creeping greasily down my face. And a bulky man leaning drunk against a car spoke unintelligibly to the air behind me, prophesying a vision; and he spoke the truth, for I turned and there she was. She passed and we walked single-file, our paths amazingly the same through the grimy ruined streets. I watched her walk, watched the exact angle of street appear and disappear each time one leg swung past the other.

The place I have worked for a month now is huge, brightly lit; a whole floor in a factory building. My boss lives there, in this one gigantic room. The kitchen is in one corner and the toilet is behind a low wall—like this morning on the street you hear events without seeing them. The place is sparsely furnished, each object carefully selected: stark German appliances, glass tables, a meat rack to hang coats on. The forks don't look like forks and the knives are triangular, but they cut clean. Two others work here, and the boss leaves; I know most about the work; am I in charge? I make coffee several times; when I ask them, they join me. The slower typist reads the paper, makes mistakes, leaves early; the better one sits up straight, seldom speaks, needs nothing. No sandwiches, no jokes. She is a poet.

Later, with my daughter, I go to the library and we look in the encyclopedia to learn that there are 500 species of frogs and the Pony Express began in 1860. There is a look-it-up club at school and she joined to wear their button; a man comes once a week to hear their answers. I am sure he will turn out to be an encyclopedia salesman. I am horrible to my daughter, grow impatient when she cannot find the right place in the encyclopedia; I have alphabetized too much today.

At home, the puppy will not eat his dinner. I have a box of cookies, my daughter has canned and frozen gook. We plan her Halloween costume. Someone calls, a woman I know slightly. Are you better? she says. You sounded so upset last time we talked. I'm not sure, but I think she said the same thing last time she called. Yes, I'm better, I said. I'm used to it now.

My work is making an index out of thousands of single cards, each with one name or fact written on it. It is like a jigsaw, like knitting, like having a baby. Every bit falls in place, and each place must be precisely right or it will be defective. We have been trying to bring it forth for two months now. It progresses, but it never gets finished. I think this all happened because I stopped reading *The Castle* in the middle; if I finished it we could finish the index, but I am under a spell and can do nothing. My life is promised to begin when this is over; I am to eat right and be kind to my daughter—perhaps I'll find a lover, go to the country, or take up volleyball.

After dinner I go back to work; my boss is hung over. Was it his turn to collapse, though, or mine? We will miss our new deadline, he says; he means the one I thought was real. We can't keep up this pace, he said. Him saying it means we can slow down. My saying it means I'm being difficult. He smiles when I disappoint him; perhaps he thinks I'm going to turn into an encyclopedia salesman.

He walks me to the subway, we look out for rats. The drunks are gone now, it's too cold. Our index is about Hitler, these streets are not real. I live continuously in the bunker, see only the dog Blondi and the picture of Frederick the Great. There are speeches on Social Darwinism. Defeatism is severely punished in the army. When my new life starts, I am going to live it with great precision.

Sally George is a writer who lives in Brooklyn. She has published short stories in Ms., Redbook, North American Review and Christopher Street. She is presently interested in market research.

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