

BIRTHING A BOOK

How does a book get birthed? Cells of ideas float around like unfertilized eggs until some seed of potential swims at them hard enough that collision is inevitable. The book is conceived, but gestation rarely lasts a mere nine months.

This special kind of motherhood seemed appealing, until I actually had to start feeding the muse at all hours of the day and night, writing pages of text then crumpling them in frustration, tossing them with disgust into the trash, like dirty diapers. Sometimes the empty page cried for attention and sometimes it pouted; no matter how hard I coaxed, the only words forthcoming were baby sounds, incomprehensible cooings that were desperate attempts at putting something—*anything*—down on the accusatory blank page.

On tantrum-free days where no negotiations were necessary, the words flowed, the ideas gelled, and motherhood felt like the best thing in the world. From toddler stage, where a few chapters barely supported its unsteady gait, the book grew into adolescence, where its physical mass and appearance only hinted at a final form. Would it be big, burly with an athletic narrative, or slender and demure with a reserved prose? As anyone who's raised an adolescent knows, it's anyone's guess as to how things will eventually turn out. And sure enough, once the book was fully grown, it had another surprise for me. It didn't want for itself what I wanted.

It ran away from home.

Before trying to woo it back, I first needed to understand what I'd done to drive it away. It took a week in retreat to do that, to figure out the heart of the story. I had to learn how to be a better listener, to let the book have its say, its independent voice. To understand what was at its very core, I had to learn how to be quiet. The story wouldn't talk to me anymore until I did.

When it was time to send the book off to college – after an offer of publication from National Geographic – I faced a hard truth I'd denied all along. According to the editors, I had an ugly baby. So ugly it would require not just surgery but *plastic* surgery: significant rewrites, deletions and some unnatural enhancements I didn't like.

With a shaky hand, I began to operate. It was painful work, slicing and stitching my baby back together into a form that was pleasing to others but not to me. Behind that slick cover was not just a semi-coherent rambling of experience and insight, but a testament to *my* suffering and deprivation. I'd conceived, birthed and raised this thing on my own. Why wasn't there even the tiniest bit of attention being paid to *me*?

Hey, at some point, every parent plays the martyr card.

And at some point, every parent has to let their child go. When I did, it was with an odd mix of relief and despair. I'd raised it as best I could; took advice when it was offered; compromised when it was best to do so. Now the book had to make its own fresh way in the world. It left me behind to find other ways to fill my evenings, to enjoy my daily walks without obsessing over chapters one and ten and everything in between. The ugly baby was about to make its debut into the world. No more time to second guess the clothes or the hair-do.

Once upon a time, people were interested in my adventure travel stories. Now they want to know what it was like to be published by National Geographic – to write a book for such a venerated publisher. Of course it is an honor, a milestone, and like any journey, it had its ups and downs, its joys and deep, painful frustrations. Come with me behind the scenes and see for yourself...

Like all of us, it would succeed or fail based on whatever wisdom it held inside its pages.



A fiction writer tells compelling stories. Done right, characters jump off the page and follow the reader through her day, long after she's set the book down to attend to the obligations of her waking life.

When all you've ever written is fiction, but then begin writing for the newspaper, everything changes. No-one wants to know about the nuances of Jack's oddly greenish complexion, or Jill's insatiable urge for blueberry flavored cheese. Who, what, where, when and why, told in short sentences and with small words is the order, and not an easy one to follow if you are accustomed to writing sentences that roll out like summer waves on a beach; wet, relentless and hypnotic.

Once you've forsaken fiction and given it the boot, writing for the newspaper is a relatively easy assignment. Keep it simple, spare and within the assigned column space: "You have eight inches to work with!" In an earlier life that used to mean one thing; now it means about 280 words.

In the truest of ironic twists, after you've written for the newspaper, trying to revive your fiction writing skills is like standing on the edge of the Grand Canyon, gazing into its grandeur and finding yourself incapable of describing it. A kind of panic takes hold when tired-out clichés about beauty and truth and time are the only utensils left in your writer's toolbox. Suddenly, you have no original thoughts and no way to connect with the muse you crushed in service of the eight inch column. It has turned its back on you, and deservedly so.

When readers of your newspaper column say they loved your travelogue, yet a fiction-writing colleague criticizes that your story *reads like* a travelogue, you have to choose: Figure out how to tell a real story again, or throw up your hands and become a welder. At least with a flame and solder and raw materials you can create something useful.

The other thing you can do is go to a workshop, in my case [Mountain Writing](#) at the Banff Centre in the Canadian Rockies. Because even when you're writing non-fiction, you still have to be able to pull on all your skills as a storyteller. At Banff, in the month-long clinic, my cohort insisted I inject life into my anemic stories. These people were hard-core ice-climbers and mountaineers and thrill-seekers who weren't interested in the bland recitations of an occasional adventure traveler. They were more interested in reading about a day in the life of a CEO than my canyoneering narrative.

But the real problem wasn't that the canyoneering stories weren't interesting, they just weren't very good. I was neither painting a picture nor was I taking the reader by rope down into the dark, spooky, mesmerizing canyons with me. It wasn't just that I needed to write more descriptively, I had to shake the reader viscerally. And that, I knew, meant I had to learn how to tell a story all over again. I'd done it before, surely it couldn't be *that* hard to do it again.

Oh, how the truth of a thing can hurt.

Fiction 101, here I come.



My inability to depict the inside of a slot canyon was making me suicidal. "A slot canyon is truly indescribable," I announced at the workshop. "*Everything* can be described," sniffed one of the editors. The other writers nodded in agreement. None of them had ever been inside a slot canyon so how would they know? I could describe the interior of a lit jack-o-lantern and they wouldn't recognize the difference. Despairing over my lack of descriptive skills, I wandered the snowy grounds of the Banff Centre bumping into people, casually mentioning that I was having trouble describing a smaller version of the Grand

Canyon and could they help? One woman, a chemist in a former life, told me to dream about it. “Picture the canyon in your mind as you drift off to sleep,” she told me. “The words will come to you, I promise.” It’s how she would unravel complicated formulas that seemed inscrutable during the light of day.

She was right, and suddenly I understood the phrase “I need to sleep on it.” After two days of dreaming a description, I’d chiseled through that enormous writer’s block of stone, and what came next flowed smoothly and easily, the difficulties I’d been suffering now just a piece of flotsam way downstream.

For me, writing creative non-fiction vs. writing for the newspaper is the difference between baking a cake from scratch and buying one from the bakery. You can get by with either, both are tasty, but the one crafted by hand will have nuances and surprises that delight those who take the time to savor every bite. A good piece of creative non-fiction is as different from a utilitarian piece of reportage as a race horse is from a Clydesdale. Both have their place and serve their purpose, but it’s important as a writer to both be able to recognize the difference, and to write it.

Now I’d reclaimed my confidence and had hit my stride. In Banff, hunched over the laptop, I spent days in my room, noting only occasionally the swirling flakes of snow outside the window, the big black crow on the balcony railing that cawed at me for five minutes every evening, the pinkish glow of dusk forcing me out of my seat to turn on a light.

The Banff Film & Book Festivals were underway—a miniature Sundance with an all-adventure theme—and National Geographic was one of the sponsors. Their editor-in-chief would be coming to the writing workshop the next day, to hear about our projects. *That’s nice*, I thought.

The failure to recognize such an important clue to one’s future is still astonishing to me. But at the end of every good writing day my mind was not on being published, it was on being fed.

I wonder what’s for dinner?



To the Banff Mountain Writing workshop, I’d brought the mostly-completed manuscript of *Only Pack What You Can Carry* so that the workshop editors could offer feedback and guidance, but it wasn’t my focus for the month. My new project was a book about leadership lessons learned in the canyons. As far as I was concerned, *Only Pack* was pretty much finished. I’d already sent out a query and sample chapter to Seal Press in California, and within two weeks had received the nicest rejection: “We think your book is appealing,” they wrote, “but we recently published something similar.” So there *was* a market for the message. Far from being discouraged, I saw it as a sign that the timing was right, and the book would eventually find a home.

Barbara Brownell Grogan, VP and Editor in Chief of National Geographic Book Division came to an early workshop and asked each of us about our projects. I’d grown up with National Geographic in my home: the magazine, guidebooks, maps and everything nature-related. So when she asked to talk to me later about my leadership book-in-progress, I was surprised. Surely they’d be more interested in the mountaineer’s memoir?

The dark-haired, pretty, slender and laser-focused Barbara sat across from me in an overstuffed chair. We talked in a room full of books while people milled around us. While I described the premise of my leadership work-in-progress, Barbara made big, looping notes in an Atlas-sized hard-cover notebook. She seemed genuinely interested in the concept, but especially interested in when I might have the book ready for publication. Considering I’d nearly given up on the project more than once, I resisted giving an answer. “Look,” I explained, “I’m not really sure where this project is going, and I truly can’t say when it will be done, but let me tell you about my *other* book.” Barbara started a fresh page of notes about *Only Pack* and after I’d made my pitch she invited me to make a more formal one, later.

This book game was new to me. I'd published fiction, poetry, literary criticism and travel essays, and I'd never had to create a proposal for any of them. The process for those genres was pretty simple—write the piece, then send it in. Books are a different animal. A well-written, succinct proposal is as hard to produce as a chapter. There is market research to be done, calculations to be made, deadlines to be determined. After I returned home from Banff, it took *months* for me to prepare the proposal and decide which three chapters I'd include. Then I tweaked and re-tweaked those chapters, delaying the submission of my proposal even longer. I began to wonder why I had suddenly become such an excellent procrastinator. Was it failure I was afraid of or success? Finally, I amassed everything into a cohesive e-mail package and hit the send button.

The long wait to hear back was excruciating.



While I waited to hear back from Barbara at National Geographic, I busied myself crossing off items from the long list I'd made after ending my CEO career with the Girl Scouts. The list had become a necessity; without it, whole days would dissolve into weeks and I'd accomplish nothing. Once a determined and productive executive, I was now a dazed and confused bumpkin with no useful time management skills. Having a weekly list got me back on track.

Conspicuously absent from the list was anything writing-related. The intensive month of writing at the Banff Centre had worn me out. Some down time would allow the creative juices to flow back into the well and fill it up again. My house needed tending to anyway—four years of accumulated filing, piles of papers to be investigated, various kinds of sorting and purging were long overdue. It was kind of mindless really, a sort of meditation on the mundane details of domestic life.

Then came Barbara's email. "I need to see more," she wrote.

With way more scrutiny than I usually apply to anything, I selected three chapters, edited them obsessively, then sent them on their way. Weeks went by before I received another email, "Can we talk?"

All women know that any sentence beginning with those three words does not lead to any kind of outcome that is good. This was it. National Geographic was breaking up with me and we hadn't even kissed yet. I whined to my friends about it. Not one of them offered condolences. "Stop being so negative," they admonished, "National Geographic *wants* the book."

My friends had more faith in me than I did. Why, I wondered, are writers particularly good at self-sabotage? But then again, I was only trying to be practical (and save myself from a really big crash of self-confidence when I was finally rejected for good). I was a first-time author for National Geographic, and they were in the job of selling books. Why on earth would they gamble on an unknown?

"Can we talk?" Those words haunted me right up until Barbara and I had our scheduled telephone conversation. I'd practiced how I would talk her out of rejecting the book, convince her to take a chance on an unknown author, that if she did I wouldn't disappoint. As the conversation unwound, I kept waiting for her to say, "We've reconsidered," but instead she asked about deadlines and potential changes. She even said, "You're a really good writer and it's so interesting..." but thought the writing could be made stronger with the guidance and support of an editor. Was I OK with all of that? Cool as a cucumber on the outside, internally I was screeching – in panic and with joy. Yet I still wasn't ready for the next words out of her mouth. "I'd like to make you a formal offer in the next few weeks. Will you be around or are you travelling somewhere exciting?"

I don't need to go anywhere, I thought, I think I'm about to embark on the ride of my life.



Two weeks passed, then three, then four as I waited for a formal offer of publication from National Geographic. My suspicions were confirmed. It had been too good to be true. Nat Geo betting on a first-time book author? Well, I'd given it a shot and congratulated myself that I'd gotten this far on dumb luck and without an agent. I was four months into "early retirement" and still had a good bit of time left before I went back to work. In the current economy, it would take months to find something I wasn't over-qualified for.

Then a friend sent an email. "Look," she wrote, "I know you're not really ready to go back to work yet, but there's a job in Charlotte that would be perfect for you. You should check it out." Classroom Central -- a non-profit that helps kids living in poverty come to school with all the school supplies they need -- was looking for a new Executive Director. I loved the mission of Classroom Central, but my friend was right. I wasn't ready to give up my freedom just yet, and if NG *was* going to make me an offer, I'd need to stay free of other obligations so I could work on and finish the book. Still, I sent in my resume—mostly out of curiosity—and received a call right away.

There were six interviews in total; two via telephone with the recruiter, one with a board member, one with the Vice Chair, and one with the Chair of the board. Then I had an interview with the staff, on-site at the school supply facility. I'd gone in resistant and ultra-protective of my freedom, but by the time I'd been through the vetting process, I knew this was a perfect fit. And it was clear by now, after months had passed since talking to Barbara, that the book deal was not going to come through.

More than half of the children attending school in the southern Piedmont of North Carolina lived in poverty. That meant they were coming to school without school supplies; without pens, without pencils, without paper. I remembered how as a pre-school child, I would draw my stories because I couldn't write. Once I could write them I did, and illustrated them too with an array of crayons, colored pencils and markers. By the time I was in fifth grade I'd created at least 10 notebook-sized novels. They would never see the light of day, but the die had been cast. Now, 40 years later, I'd finished a *real* book that was poised on the brink of publication. But what chilled me to the bone was this question: What if I'd never had a pencil?

I accepted the position of Executive Director for [Classroom Central](#) and on that very day, I received an offer of publication from National Geographic.



Now that I had an offer of publication I needed a wise set of eyes to give it the once over. Not wanting to settle for less than was possible, nevertheless I had no idea what that was. And in truth, having Nat Geo as my publisher was worth more than money. After input from other writers and a few agents I knew, I made a counter-offer. Nat Geo gave me a little more – not much – but now we had a deal. The contract, Barbara said, would be forthcoming from their legal department in a few weeks. Now it was time to find the right attorney to help me with the maze of legalise. And two filmmaker friends of mine who had once worked with Nat Geo warned me about their contracts: "They want everything and give you nothing. They are impossible to negotiate with."

So now the business side of book publishing, the ugly side, began. I didn't want to be talking to attorneys and developing an ulcer when what I really needed to be doing was writing, so I found an entertainment lawyer who had done some good work for a writer friend. We waited for the contract to arrive.

In the meantime, Barbara arranged for me to fly up to D.C. to begin working with my assigned editor, [Karen Kostyal](#) "I think you two are a good match," Barbara told me.

"Has she read my work?" I asked, "And does she like it?"

"Yes, and yes," Barbara answered, a little bemused.

“Because,” I said, suddenly feeling protective of my ‘baby,’ “I can’t change my voice.”

“We don’t want you to,” Barbara answered, “But we do want this book to be as strong as it can be.”

Suddenly, flashbacks from the [Banff Mountain Writing workshop](#), where I’d had to turn my approach to writing upside down, the weeks of desperation I’d felt when I couldn’t hit my stride – all of that crashed over me like a wave of dread. What if this Karen person secretly hated my writing and wanted me to change everything? The mere prospect of it felt exhausting.

On April 12, 2010, I boarded a plane to Washington, D.C.. The manuscript for *Only Pack What You Can Carry* was safely stored on a thumb drive, which I kept in a jacket pocket, close to my heart.



Before travelling to D.C. to meet my assigned editor, [Karen Kostyal](#), I’d sought the help of Google to locate an image of her. She’d written and edited many books for Nat Geo yet I couldn’t find her picture anywhere. At the DC airport we managed to locate each other, though. She collected me in a red Prius and we proceeded to lunch. Outdoors in the spring sunshine, Karen mostly listened as I simultaneously consumed an excellent Greek salad and answered her many questions. She was professional and warm, though not overly so, and although she kept it well hidden, I sensed a slight bit of skepticism. *A former CEO writing a book for National Geographic? We’ll see about that.*

After lunch we drove to her house then walked around the neighborhood, through an old cemetery where the gray weathered headstones and the cherry trees laden with white and pink blossoms looked like a scene from the movies. Karen wanted to know about my life and I told her everything.

“Are you going to put that in the book?” she asked.

“No,” I’d answer, then tell her something else.

“What about that, will *that* be in the book?”

“No,” I’d say. It went on like this for the length of our brisk walk, Karen nodding, my answers leading her to ask other questions.

At the kitchen table in her beautiful home filled with interesting art and artifacts, we got down to business. At this point, *Only Pack What You Can Carry* was a collection of at least twelve travel stories from all over the world, divided into four distinct themes.

“We need to pick four essays to illustrate your four themes,” she said, my worst nightmare coming true, “and really draw them out as stories.”

“Four?” I squeaked.

“Four,” she answered.

“How will I do that?” I wondered aloud. Deadline was less than six months away, which would have been OK if the manuscript were going to press with only minor tweaks. What Karen was talking about here was major surgery.

“Barbara will get us more time,” Karen promised. “You can do this.”

That evening, we met Barbara for dinner where she toasted our soon-to-be-finished bestseller. Karen and I laid out the plan for re-vamping the book. Barbara asked a few clarifying questions but liked the direction. Karen lobbied for more time and we agreed that November was reasonable, given everyone's schedules. Karen was deep into one of National Geographic's biggest cross-platform projects to date; she was writing the companion book to the television epic *Great Migrations*. November it would be. That was seven months away, but I had a lot of work to do. And a new job at [Classroom Central](#), where I was still in my learning curve and trying to build a new team.

That night in Karen's guest room, before bed, I looked at images on my digital camera, photos from home, pictures of me with friends and one in particular. I realized that for the first time in a long time I felt vulnerable and in need of comfort. Looking at pictures of the people most dear to me offered reassurance that this unanticipated and most thrilling ride of my life about to start would be less scary with them alongside.

At least that's what I hoped.



The months following that meeting with [Karen Kostval](#) and Barbara in DC were a crazy-quilt of ideas, and I tried to stitch them all into something magical. We'd decided that following the yet-to-be written introduction, Courage would be the first chapter, even though Courage was really the third essential in the package of four. How many people on the Nat Geo team looked at that chapter? 700? Not really. It just felt that way. And trying to satisfy everyone, yet still stay true to myself, was beyond miserable. Courage was batted back and forth like a beat up tennis ball until I finally threw it over the fence for awhile and started on something new. Barbara's admonishment to me throughout "Courage" was "it can't be so much about you. We need to hear less Janice."

Not about me? *Not about me? Hello! It's always about me* (just ask my friends). So the bitter truth was at hand. JB had to take a back seat, a place both unfamiliar and unappealing. The next chapter, Solitude, proceeded along those lines. I washed my scent off the narrative of Solitude and turned it in. For awhile, I heard nothing. Then Karen, now a trusted mentor after daily emails and weekly consults, came back to me and said, "you're not going to believe this, but we need more Janice. Can you take some time to draw out the details? Don't be in such a hurry to move on to the next thing."

I laughed. I really did. Earlier in this whole process I'd felt as if I were about to embark upon the ride of my life. Here it was. Told to do one thing one minute, then something else the next, only to return to the original impulse. For some reason, I wasn't upset or angry, just amused. So I returned to the story and put everything I'd taken out back in. At this point I knew editor Karen would help me take care of whatever needed to get gone, so I didn't fuss too much over revisions. While writing "Solitude," I hit my stride again: I could leap over whatever obstacles lay ahead. Karen and I tweaked and tweaked and tweaked and then we sent it off to Barbara. Deadline was approaching and Barbara took a little longer than we'd have preferred. But her note to me—when she finally responded--said "Janice, you are gifted..."

OK, that was all I needed to buck up and prepare for the next thing. Barbara was of course having a concurrent conversation with Karen who was obligated by contract to continue slashing with the red pen. But still, I'd had my little bit of encouragement from the top. A little morsel of support was all I needed.

Time to move on to the next chapter, "Introspection," and the snowy memories I'd need to resurrect from a wonderful but strange dog-sledding adventure in northern Minnesota.



By now, deep into the throes of meeting deadlines, I no longer had a life. Up early and to [Classroom Central](#) to be their leader used up all my energy by the end of the day. But then I had to come home and write until very late at night. And the writing had to be good. Somehow, somehow, I managed to channel the muse all but a few times. Part of this I think was discipline – you carve out time, religiously, you don't abandon it, you don't despair, and then if you're lucky, the muse will visit you every night, sit on your shoulder and help you along. Thus began "Introspection," the dog-sledding trip. Something really kind of magical happened with this chapter. Maybe I was exhausted, punchy, cynical, I don't know. I *do* know I *loved* writing that piece. And when I read it back to myself, every vivid detail of being there, every smell, every near-frostbitten finger seemed like it had all happened just yesterday.

Writing it brought me back to what took me there in the first place: the recognition that time alone, time spent in a new environment -- one where challenges jump out from behind every turn -- is a gift to oneself. Writing that chapter -- and reading it -- made me laugh, smile, remember with puzzlement that odd couple with whom I spent a week, and whose names I still don't know to this day.

What helped with this -- and really, with all the stories -- were my journals. When I travel, I carve out time every day, at the end of the day, over dinner, before bed, before TV, before calling home, to write what I remember about the amazing experiences that filled me up. By not having a laptop or a crackberry or any other email enabled device, and too, being in the midst of nowhere, I can indulge in hours of writing by hand in what are destined to become the keepers of cherished memories: my travel notebooks. I have stacks of them now. I love every one of them as if they are children. I know when each of them was born, and when their pages ran out -- which does not mean they are dead! I always made sure I had another journal at the ready, its pages ready to act as a basin when words spilled from one journal to the next.

But the muse. To this day, I wonder why it never abandoned me, even when I was so tired I could hardly remember my own name.

In the middle of writing (and reliving) the canyoneering, dogsledding, and trapezing stories -- and really getting into them and hitting my stride -- the contract came back.

Everything screeched to a halt.



Reading the National Geographic contract, my jaw dropped. A filmmaker friend looked at it with me. "See?" he said, crossing his arms. "I *told* you." What he'd told me was they wanted everything and offered nothing. That wasn't completely true, but the contract certainly wasn't enticing. He shook his head: "They want the artist to take all the risk, and they want all the reward." So, with fairness being one of the basic tenets in my life, I spoke to my attorney and told her what I wanted changed. "I'm not optimistic," she warned, "but I'll try."

To clarify, I wasn't trying to re-negotiate the financial agreement Barbara and I had made months earlier. That, of course, wouldn't be fair. It was other things, like creative input, hard deadlines and so on. The truth is that the contract had upset me to the point of distraction, and I needed to get it out of my head as quickly as possible so I could get back to writing. After all, the *real* deadline *was* approaching, and every irritation, big or small, was impeding my progress.

In the middle of all this mayhem, I finally had to revisit the dreaded "Courage" chapter. Because it had been read and revised by so many people, it was just a shadow of the thing I'd originally submitted. I'd put it aside for awhile and focused on writing "Introspection" instead. Editor Karen, who sensed my frustration and exhaustion, had called and left a message for me. "Janice," she said, "I just want to say I think you did a fantastic job with 'Courage.' I think you nailed it. Congratulations." Karen respected my intolerance for 'cheerleading,' but she had an uncanny knack of knowing when I needed a little morale boost.

The first draft of “Introspection” was ready, so I sent it on. Before she received it, Karen asked: “How do you feel about this chapter?”

“I like it,” I answered, “It has great energy, it’s funny and strange, and I think it’s probably going to be the best chapter in the book.”

“Great!” she replied, “I can’t wait to read it. And don’t worry about ‘Courage,’ there really isn’t a whole lot more you need to do with that.” She paused. “I don’t know how you’re juggling all of this, but I just want you to know that you’re really inspiring me with your writing. And you will inspire others too.”

Karen wasn’t one to blow sunshine insincerely, so I took comfort in her words. Maybe I was just too hard on myself. I poured a glass of wine and sat down outside on the porch with “Courage.” I listened for awhile to the birds chattering in the trees and watched the sky change color as dusk descended. Finally, when I felt calm in my heart, I started to read. It didn’t take very long before my eyes welled up with tears.

It was the worst thing I had ever written.



Why was “Courage” was the worst thing I’d ever written? Because I’d allowed too many voices to muddy mine, and worse, I was trying to satisfy *everyone*. Still, the notion of trashing the “Courage” chapter was so depressing I set it down and walked away, for the second time. I would work on something else until I learned how well (or how poorly) “Introspection” would be received.

“We love it!” was the delayed, yet unanimous response. Tweaks and rips and red pen marks aside, it didn’t need that much extra work. And “Solitude,” the chapter that had initially been fumigated to remove all traces of ‘Janice’ then rewritten to include her, had also been warmly received. So now I knew what I had to do with “Courage.” The tone had been carved into the other two chapters; I just needed to get the needle of “Courage” into that same groove.

Ironically, “Courage” was all about the first time I really had to summon it, to be able to step off a cliff into the deep, dark unknown of a slot canyon. And in the re-writing of it, courage was what I had to summon to be true to my voice, and *only* my voice. None of the editors and readers were there in the canyon with me. So when I was asked by them to break from the action to give a self-help tip, I finally said no. Karen backed me up. Later on in the process, there would be other places I had to compromise but this was not going to be one of them. Writing the courage experience was too personal, too intense, and too meaningful to water down. Thankfully, in the end, everyone listened.

A visual artist had been commissioned to create the cover for *Only Pack*. Her first designs were cute and whimsical, but everyone agreed were too girly. I had my own ideas for cover art and I shared them with the group. By the time the second set of cover options came back, my idea wasn’t among them, but the cover image was moving a little more toward an outdoor theme. Still, I wasn’t completely in love with any of them, and was still hoping they’d give my cover idea a try. “Will I get a chance to give final input?” I asked the team. “Absolutely,” came the answer, “but for now, just focus on getting those chapters finished.”

In the meantime, the contract came back *again*. I had one more chapter to write, but Nat Geo’s lawyer was asking for a deadline two months earlier than the one to which I had previously agreed. I sat there and looked at the words on the paper. Two months? There was no way, even if I didn’t have a full time job, and I did nothing but write for 24-hours a day. I couldn’t meet this new deadline, and frankly, I didn’t understand why the sands kept shifting. I called Karen. “Janice,” she said, “I’m not involved in this part. Please let Barbara know what’s going on.”

Then I telephoned a dear friend. “I can’t believe I’ve gone this far, only to have to kill the deal.”

“Do you have to kill the deal?” he asked.

“I won’t legally bind myself to a promise I can’t possibly fulfill. I have no choice but to walk away.”

I wrote an email letter to Barbara. “Please help.” And that night I lay my head down on the pillow realizing my book dream was done. Over. This wasn’t a matter of courage or cowardice, it was a matter of waving the white flag. I wasn’t going to kill myself trying to meet an impossible deadline. Age has some value, and that’s recognizing that you can’t put on a cape and suddenly become Wonder Woman overnight, defying gravity and time and sleep.

“You got close,” I remember telling myself. “Take some comfort in that.”



After I’d come to the sad conclusion I’d have to kill the book deal, Barbara called me immediately. “Let’s not give up,” she said. “Please tell me your concerns.” I did. They sprayed out like water from a burst pipe.

“Let’s start at the end point,” she suggested, which is how I like to do things too. After we did this, Barbara and I realized we were on the same page. “I think the attorney is too,” she said, “but the language isn’t clear. Let us agree now on a schedule and I’ll have her include that in the contract.” The revised contract came back with the agreed-upon dates, and I no longer had to be talked down from the ledge. But there were still a couple of non-negotiables. I sent the information to my lawyer, tried to shake the aggravation from my thinking, and went back to work.

But even though we’d come to terms with the dates, the deadline was still a crushing one. Every chapter I wrote had to be reviewed by Karen then re-edited by me. After Karen perused it again, it went to Barbara. Barbara’s comments had to be addressed, and then Karen had to look at it yet again. (In writing this blog I realize that Karen should probably have received some kind of medal for persistence on the front lines.) When a writer is trying to maintain continuity in energy and voice, this kind of fractured production is very disruptive. Still, it wasn’t going to change. This was the reality of writing a book – a book that had to be both well-written and commercially appealing. At any given time I was juggling all four chapters and trying to write an introduction and an epilogue too. And, I realized, the cover hadn’t come back yet: I still expected an opportunity to give input.

Karen wanted to know what the introduction would entail. “The four themes,” I told her. “No,” she answered. “Readers need to know who you are. If all they see is a CEO who travels the world, they aren’t going to feel a connection to you. You need to tell your story.”

This was another unanticipated twist. I’m a private person. Very few people know much about me, and the only ones who do know are expected to honor my expectation for confidentiality. So now I had to tell my story to the whole world? At that moment I realized I was going to have to summon a different kind of courage, to reveal to everyone some of my most painful memories and the challenging situations that sculpted me into the very person who was writing the book. It was just like staring into the deep dark of the slot canyon. I wasn’t sure I could do it. But then I remembered something that the writer Harlan Ellison had said, that “...the act of writing with serious intent involves enormous personal risk. It means one will walk forever on the tightrope, with each new step presenting the possibility of learning a truth...that is too terrible to bear.” Wasn’t this book all about stepping up to challenges and taking risks, without knowing in advance the outcome?

I sat outside on a warm, late-summer evening. Next to me, a yellow legal pad, a blue pen and a big glass of wine sat waiting, like a perfect still-life painting. Rocking back and forth in a green glider, I looked at the pinkish blue sky, the tree tops that

towered over the neighborhood houses, and listened to the birds. The muse took a deep breath and so did I: after a big gulp of vino, I picked up the blue pen and the yellow pad and began to write:

“All I ever wanted was a horse...”

I didn't stop for five hours.



I sent Karen the introduction along with a warning that it was an opusculé, a long-winded sprint past the ghosts haunting Memory Lane. “Don't wait for me to get back to you,” she said, “keep working on the Epilogue and other chapters.”

Writing the Introduction had uncovered some long-buried clues to the person I'd become. Until I'd written the story of my 10-year old attempt to secure some social justice for myself and my downtrodden female classmates, I didn't understand why I had such a problem with authority, and why, as an adult, any hint of unfair treatment – to *anyone* -- sparked in me an incendiary response. After writing the Introduction I understood why I trusted no-one, why I had been so deeply cynical for so long, and why I had adopted the attitude: “You can count on people – they'll always let you down.”

But there wasn't any time to think about that because I had another, more immediate problem that needed tending. Part of each and every chapter contained a reflection on different societies, religions, people and places, and how those societies, religions, people and places viewed things like solitude, introspection, courage and commitment. All good publishers require that the accuracy of a writer's statements be verified. Barbara knew at this point that lobbing one more grenade in my direction was dangerous, because the explosion might cause me to collapse like a bad soufflé. She offered up a researcher: Julie Beer became a cherished member of my team. Her thoroughness was remarkable, and her cheerful demeanor was contagious. Between Karen's genuine and constructive feedback, and Julie's exceptional research chops, I felt supported in a way that gave me hope I'd get through this thing alive.

But then came the next demand. A social media campaign. At the time, my connection to technology consisted of a computer once owned by Fred Flintstone, and a brick-sized cell phone with an antenna. “You'll need a Facebook fan page, a website, a blog, and you'll need to start tweeting right away,” came the order.

All I could see ahead of me was the huge and growing mountain of deadlines I had to summit. And now this? *Would it ever end?*

In bed that night, I buried my head in the pillow and screamed.



The new summit: not the book deadline, but something even more elusive -- my deep and uneasy relationship with electronica. There was no point trying to bluff my way through the social media conversations. I admitted to being an amoeba swimming in a pool of more highly evolved creatures. Barbara didn't hesitate to find a way to usher me into the 21st century: “We'll get you a social media coach,” she said, “who will walk you through all this. Don't worry, you'll be fine. You might even find it fun!”

A few weeks and one conference call later I felt a little better: the social media coach was a woman who asked really good questions, asked me about my comfort level with Facebook, Twitter and blogging, made suggestions about the kinds of things I should include on a website. I'd already started work on a website, but knew better than to default to a DIY version. Nothing worse than a crappy website to create a memorable impression! [Moonlight Creative Group](#) had done some

incredibly inventive and fun pro bono design work for [Classroom Central](#) and I was so impressed by their flair I hired them to create my site. It would be months before the site went live, so I kept that information to myself.

I chiseled away at all the chapters, and every night wrapped up my writing sessions by visiting with the Epilogue. I had titled it “The Loneliest Place to Die,” referring to a comment made by the poet wanderer [Everett Ruess](#) in a letter to his brother. I knew how I wanted the Epilogue to sound, how I wanted readers to feel when they read it, and every night – when I finished with the other chapters -- I found I could add a little bit to the Epilogue and build it slowly over time. I wanted “The Loneliest Place to Die” to be the ultimate statement about how to live a life of vigor and resonance.

But the next day, a phone call with Barbara revealed why the sands of the deadline continued to shift, and why they were putting so much pressure on me. “We want to do an ARC (Advanced Reader Copy) which will really help your sales. That’s why we need to have all the chapters in the very best condition they can be.”

“I can focus on those,” I answered, “but that means I can’t finish the Introduction or the Epilogue.”

“Well,” she answered, “we can perhaps put an abbreviated introduction in there, but if you could have the four chapters in good shape by (two weeks later), we should be in fine shape to move forward.”

“What about the cover?” I asked.

“What about it?” she answered.

“I was told I’d have a chance to render final comments.”

“Of course, of course,” she said, “We’ll set up a call.”

I called Karen. “This ARC,” I asked her, “I’m worried about submitting and publishing something that’s not ready.”

“You need to have it as close to finished as you can,” she said, “because even though everyone thinks there can be changes later, you’re really not going to have a chance to do that.”

I bemoaned the pressure of the deadlines, the social media expectations, and how it was affecting my writing.

“Just keep doing whatever you’re doing,” she said. “Take comfort knowing that as hard as this is, you’re making it happen.”

“I don’t like the cover,” I blurted, then spewed a litany of complaints. “They keep telling me I’ll have an opportunity for final input, but it’s like they’re stalling.”

“I don’t know how to break this to you,” she said, “but writers have very little influence over the cover. Huge battles get waged over covers, and most of the time, writers don’t get much say. But if you feel it’s important to submit your two cents, then by all means do so.”

On the next conference call to discuss the ARC deadline, I asked if I could give my feedback on the cover. I sensed when the conversation began that everyone was on edge. I could feel the tension through the phone line.

My comments began with an observation about the lines. A sharp voice on the other end of the line cut me off in mid-sentence, “Lines? *Lines*? We don’t have time for this. Janice, the decision on this cover has been made.”

I was so shocked I couldn’t speak and there was a very long, very awkward moment of silence. And then I just let it expand, so those last curt words would just hang in the air, indicting themselves.

I don't remember what I said finally, but I remember what I thought. I thought, "This isn't the way I do business."

When the call ended, with yet another demand and another deadline, I cried. When I get really, really angry, I don't shout or break things, I cry. And I hate it. It means things have gone too far.

And it really wasn't about the cover. All I wanted was a chance to give my input, which I'd been promised. In retrospect I *like* the cover. But at the time, with all the other stress, having my comments thrown into the trash stung like a lash.

I still didn't have a contract. I could still walk away. But I'd learned after a lifetime of many emotionally charged moments to sleep on it before making a decision. The next morning I would know what to do.



The wisdom of a good night's sleep before making a critical decision once again proved beneficial, and I sorted myself out. I'd been expecting one thing, but gotten another. Time to abandon expectations – hadn't I written in the book about that very thing? And honestly, this was National Geographic willing to publish my first book. Reality check 101!

I took a moment to count my blessings, then put on my big-girl panties and faced the next challenge, which was trying to launch a social media campaign amidst the pressure to have all the chapters ready for the ARC. I decided I was going to handle the coming challenges with as little emotion as possible. Being so reactive wasn't helping me at all; it was just wasting energy better used toward meeting the deadline.

During the next conference call I asked the Nat Geo group: "What's more important, finishing the chapters or starting the social media campaign?"

"We want you to focus on the book," the voices answered. Pause. "But it would be good if you could start a blog."

"I'll blog once every two weeks," I said, "any more than that and it's going to interfere with the deadline."

The social media coach said she'd have a plan for me – of blog topics, Facebook posts and so on – within the week. A week passed, then two. Then three. I worried about her. She'd seemed so sincere and committed, and now she was just gone. "Don't worry," Nat Geo told me, "We'll find someone else."

"No hurry," I answered, secretly thrilled that I had this window of time to finish all the chapters, unhindered by trying to manage the social media pressure.

Editor Karen worked double-time alongside me to get everything finished. "The Introduction is too long," she told me.

"I know," I answered. "What do you think should be cut?"

She was quiet for just a moment, then said, "Janice, this is the part where you're going to have to let go and trust me. Finish up the other chapters and the Epilogue, and I'll trim the Introduction."

"Will I have a chance to see it before it goes to print?"

"Probably not," she answered.

Silence on my end, and a deep sigh.

Well, at least she was telling me the truth. Karen spoke: “It will be OK,” she said, “Really.”

I knew that editing *Only Pack* had become more than just a job for Karen. I also knew she wouldn't do anything underhanded or half-assed. But still, this was my early *life* we were about to share with the world...

It's amazing what you'll agree to when time is running out...



There was light at the end of the tunnel, I could see it. Having surrendered the Introduction to Karen for completion, the Epilogue and other tweaks were nearly done. Now it was time to choose titles for them. I had always wanted the Epilogue to be named “The Loneliest Place to Die,” referring to an interior death of spirit, something we should rail against for the length of our living. But Barbara felt that was too much about death. Remembering my futile attempts at influencing the cover, I tried to conjure something else. Naming the Introduction was easy – Baggage -- as I'd had to dredge up so much of it in the writing of that chapter.

But the Epilogue had me stumped. What do you get when you trade in too much baggage for just enough?

Carry-on.

“But that sounds like carrion,” Barbara quipped, “so it's still too much about death.”

Good point, I thought.

“I have an idea,” she offered. “Let's call it ‘Only Pack What You Can Carry.’”

After *weeks* of trying to come up with a title, here it was. “Yes,” I practically shouted, “that's *it!* It's *perfect!*”

Now – could it be true? – I was just a day or two from completion. I felt a little flutter of anticipation – soon I would have a life again!

Barbara said, “We'd like you to consider including exercises at the end of each chapter.”

I think I literally banged my head on the table. “I never wanted this to be a self-help book,” I argued. “It will be incredibly hard to create exercises that will resonate for everyone.”

Barbara laid out the suggested template for the exercises and asked me to give it some serious thought. “You've spent a lot of time with these concepts,” she said, “so they're second nature to you. The average person will appreciate some guidance.”

That night I told Karen I was really uncomfortable with the whole thing. “What if I just don't write them?” I asked her. “It's not like I have a whole bunch of time either.”

“Those exercises are going to be written one way or another,” she answered calmly. “How will you feel about that?”

She was right. And this time I didn't waste any time being upset or feeling crazy. I spent the rest of the evening and all of the next day thinking of how I could give guidance that would resonate just as powerfully for the person living in a concrete jungle as it would for the person living in a natural paradise.

I wrote the exercises, trying my best to keep them simple and universal and practical, and in the end, after so much angst and stress, I met the deadline after all.

The Advance Reader Copy went to press.

And I still didn't have a contract.



While I waited for the ARC of *Only Pack* to be printed, I stayed busy finishing my website and getting a head start on the required blogs. Nat Geo introduced me to a new social media coach, [Joe Flood](#), who outlined a cohesive plan for promoting the hardcover book once it was released in February. During a conference call, we talked about blog topics. I told the group I was already writing about what it was like to write a book for National Geographic. "Oh, you need to start tweeting about that right away!" someone said.

I took a deep breath. "OK, folks," I said, "Listen up. Asking me to tweet is like asking me to drink the Kool-Aid. I'm not going to do it." I braced for the response. This was not going to be pretty.

"That's all right," the voice answered. "You shouldn't do it if you feel obligated. It will be obvious that you're not really into it. But you're OK with blogging, right?"

I think I was actually a little stunned. "Blogging, yes, that's fine." There was more talk about Facebook and other promotional opportunities before the call wrapped up. No unreasonable demands. No angst. "Oh!" the project manager exclaimed, "We received your ARC today, Janice. It looks fantastic! Congratulations!"

"Can I get a copy?" I asked.

"They won't be ready to ship for a couple of weeks but I'll send you mine."

A few days later it arrived in the mail, my fingers practically shredding the padded envelope in my excitement to get to the contents. Here it was, the penultimate version, the softcover iteration of *Only Pack*. I looked at the front cover, at the back cover, at my name and at the National Geographic logo. Even with the actual book in my hands, I still couldn't believe it was real.

There were a couple more hurdles to leap before the deadline and that was for me to do one final proof for the copy-editor. Once that task had been completed and I'd sent the corrected pages back to Nat Geo, something occurred to me. Now that I'd made the very last red-pen mark and the book was going to press, my time with editor [Karen Kostyal](#) was done. For so many months we'd talked or emailed constantly, our conversations not just covering the book-in-progress but how I was holding up, what was going on in the world. I'd trusted her to do the revisions on my early life story and she hadn't let me down. The prospect of her not being in my daily life anymore made me sad in a way that surprised me. I wrote her a note: "I confess to being jealous of you spending your time on another writer." Her response: "Come up for a visit." Within the month I boarded a plane for a fun weekend with her in Charlottesville, VA. Karen had not just helped me craft *Only Pack* into a much stronger piece of writing, she became a cherished friend. Life, I remember thinking, is so full of surprises.

Release date was scheduled for February 15, 2011, but once the ARC was released, the phone started ringing with requests for interviews, some as far away as the UK. In the middle of the pre-publicity, the contract came back, with most of my asks agreed to. After a brief consult with the attorney, and a quick slash of my signature, back it went to the legal department.

And now it was official. I was a National Geographic author.

I'll never forget the day the first box of books arrived at my house. I tore into it and there they were, 24 of them stacked neatly together. The cover looked a little different, more painterly, but otherwise, there it was – a bigger and more solid version of the ARC.

I sat on the floor and looked at the box as though it were a cradle, a few Styrofoam pellets swaddling the thing that had consumed the last 9 months of my life. With Karen as my midwife, I really *had* birthed a book. I thought about all the labor pains, the false alarms, and the post-baby weight that had sneakily attached itself to my backside. Here, in front of me was the outcome of my labor: the “child” about to be sent into the world to make its own way.

I could hear a clock ticking somewhere in the house.

What would happen now, I wondered?

For months following the book's release, there were radio, magazine and TV interviews that had to be juggled with responsibilities at work, keeping on top of the social media obligations, and trying to maintain some balance. The baby-weight was already an issue – during the hectic period of rewriting and editing, I barely got to ride, I forgot where my gym was located, and even walking after dinner went by the wayside. Ten pounds later, I realized that promoting the book was way harder and taking more time than writing it did. It felt like I was trying to get a barely literate child into Harvard. I wondered if, in the end, it was all worth it?

Then I got the letter. It was an email actually, from someone I didn't know. The subject line simply said, “Thank you.” It was from a reader at a critical crossroads in life, paralyzed by the thought of making yet another bad decision. “Your book,” the email said, “helped me find a way to keep moving forward. I can't tell you how much this has meant to me. I felt like you wrote this book for me.”

I would get more letters like that – heartfelt, beautiful stories of people struggling to choose their next path – and any doubts I'd ever had about *Only Pack* were erased by a sweep of communiqués from readers thanking me for writing the book. One always hopes that their child goes out into the world and makes a difference; for me, learning how my “baby” had helped so many readers was more rewarding than money or accolades.

And here was another moment when I thought about how life is so full of surprises. I knew that *Only Pack* would resonate for many people, because most of us at some point will look for better, more meaningful ways to live our lives. But I never thought that the book could or would pull someone out of the ashes, or inspire them to do a complete 180 spin. Or that they would take the time to write and have the trust to share some of their most painful moments with me.

Sometimes our children turn out better than we are ourselves. I hope that's true because it's out of my hands.

Go on now, child, hit the open road and do some good.

THE END

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