

A Woman's Life

A woman's life is a composite of must and should, scribe and graffiti, hum and screech. We are special in our forever between-ness, our capacity for moment, for filling in the crossword blanks with invented words. We have electric blankets waiting, we can invent hot chocolate, and the dog's wet feet, the quick-falling revelations of jelly doughnuts and toenail parings. Not to mention the plugged sink and the backed-up sewer, the momentous arrival of repairpersons whose tools we could manipulate as easily as they do. This has nothing to do with domestic realism, or kitchen domination and its perversions, but something to do with the satisfying thump of the floor underfoot, the hand that can twist the top of a jar open, the elbow flourishing oil change. Capacity: bell, book and candle, we'll be excommunicated for what we know how to do and keep doing then, for what we flourish with triumph. Finished with being beggars and beguilers, we trundle past our earlier oppressions without a glance, hey there girlie, where are you going? and we just keep walking, keep walking, keep our legs scissoring as calm and clean as can be.

A woman's life is about taking back a woman's life, is about re-painting the ceiling so the stars are visible, about vanishing the rust on the car, about polishing our shoes with spit. Forget the hair, the face, the pantyhose, forget the cover. Camouflage, we're ready to go in with irons and toaster ovens, with toilet paper and telephone books. Everything becomes a tool for transformation. So the world isn't going to change, wait until you see what happens with a little vinegar and newspaper. This is not a plot, its marjoram, sit up and smell the pot scrubbing the kettle, and the whole works just bubbling away as if to suggest a new stew, a new mixture for inhalation.

Too traditional you say, these images of cleaning, cooking, keeping

the world on Irt tracks? Well, we stir that pot, and the brew that wafts from its lid is us -- potent, potentially lickerous, spirituous, an emanation from the regions past and yet to come. So don't for a moment believe we've been fenced in, there's a sledgehammer around here, and a crowbar, a forklift and a welder, we'll put the world back together again after we've taken it apart, and don't forget that we can fix almost anything, given half a chance, an opportunity to experiment, or try at least.

And don't forget, a woman's life is from one in to another out, from one dodge to another duck, from paint to splash and magnet to leap, from ledger to toilet, from feretory to bedroom, from ferment to fester, from boil to pimple, from fly to spider, from innuendo to furnace. Check it out, this clairvoyance: far-seeingness, second sight, eyes in the backs of our heads and our elbows, twice as many nerves in our backs as vertebrae; don't underestimate this sightseeing, she has purpose and she keeps good records, a women's life that is, a life full of wind and bluster and blue cool grasses. Quarters and pitchforks are all the same to her, pages and plant leafs, starfish and marble cake. Manageable, comely, full of texture and promise.

And just in case you think it's nothing, signifying sound and fury over a quiet reprise in the old rocker, well, just take a look at Tena Turner, or even better your aunt Hilda running the world in her spare time; and all the mascara may run and all the tissues may sop and all the buttons may pop but she gets on with it, gets things done, making the world run smoothly and trying to patch up the big holes the men blow in it, whether its from farts in the underwear or bombs in the desert. Just keep her bandages sticky and her permanents kinked, her gherkins fresh vinegared and her impudence pure: the world may impugn her for gender and sex but she keeps it all rolling, rolling, rolling.

And whether it comes down to lobbies or loaves, to carpets or breasts or hedgehogs or islands, she gets her feet wet, she gets her fingers burnt,

she gets her ass in a sling, her legs in a cross, her tongue tied, her head turned, her ears perked, her knees akimbo with her elbows, whether she gets knocked up or knocked down, she has a life, alive, a life. Enceinte or not, mother or sister, aunt or niece, wife or lover, she has a life that would startle you blue, if you were stupid enough to suspect that she didn't. She is an encyclopedia, a china shop, a swiss army knife. She is a filing cabinet, an hourglass, an intermission. She is medicine: a medium, a meditation, a voice in the dark reminding you of your conscience.

Nasty or not, she can't be ignored, can't be effaced, forgotten, or shelved. She's pasteurizing and deductive and infamous, hypnagogic and liverish and misprisioned, gloriously insidious, you think you have her pegged, well think again and try not to perforate your own periscope, a woman's life is a hard thing to see and harder still to read, even harder to live, between socket wrenches and treadmills, between yawn and tweeze and all those other depilations that are completely unnecessary, bikini waxes be damned, she is going to scare the living hell out of you.

And don't just assume she is not endlessly ambush, a sprung trap, a stuck door, an iced lock. She'll take you completely by surprise, just when you think she's a bird in the hand, or a soft in the hard, she'll be away, in free fall or free flight, a balloonist or clown, a magician or blizzard, and you, you'll be left trying to figure out the strange components of a woman's life, the way it never quite seems to be what it is, the way it works when it seems it's not working, the way that it shines, the way that it smiles, the way that it bounces and splashes and prickles and mimes, a woman's life, a woman's life, a gloriously woman's life. Whether it's art or plumbing or law; whether it's political, nunsensical, or rural; whether it's coming or going or here, a woman's life, a woman's life, a gloriously woman's life. And that's all there is to it. If you don't believe me, try living one. You'll never be the same.

Aritha van Herk, March 4, 1991