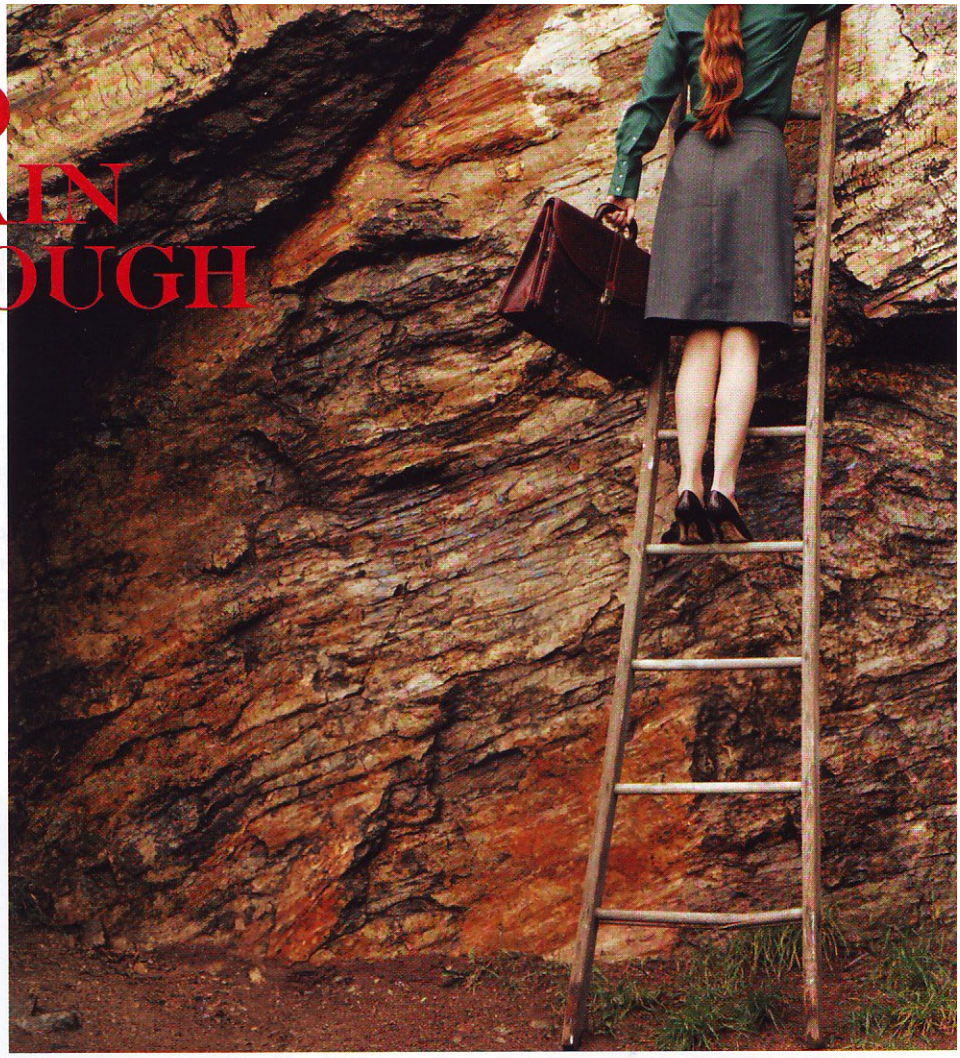
AIN'T NO MOUNTAIN HIGH ENOUGH



WHY DO SOME PEOPLE GET AHEAD WHILE OTHERS ARE PERPETUALLY STUCK AT THE BOTTOM? LOUISA KAMPS INVESTIGATES AMBITION—WHERE IT REALLY COMES FROM, WHY IT CAN BE HARD TO MAINTAIN, AND HOW TO GET SOME OF THAT MOJO BACK

Bob Dylan didn't mean to bring me down. But reading his recent memoir, *Chronicles: Volume One*, in that solipsistic way we often come to other people's stories, I start feeling blue about the state of my creative life.

Dylan's self-portrait, circa 1961, having landed in New York after "clearing the hell out" of Minnesota, crackles with the urgent expectations of a young person "heading for the fantastic lights." My own grand plans, when I moved from Wisconsin to Manhattan 30 years later, centered not around overturning the folk scene but writing smart, stylish essays for *The New Yorker*, where, to my hat-tossing delight, I landed a job as an editorial assistant at 23. Dylan was all feisty confidence from the get-go, while it took me years to speak to superiors without a squeak. Still, in Dylan's determination I see more than a bit of my former self. When I finally, sadly put down his book, I realize how faint my big city dreams have become. Even before moving back to Wisconsin four years ago to marry a man I've known since high school, my motivation was flagging. Where did my ambition go? I wonder, feeling every one of my now 39 years—and, startlingly, a pressing hollowness near my heart. Whatever happened, kid, to your own sparkling potential? Is there any way to point yourself back toward the fantastic lights?

For a while, busy as I am writing part-time for ELLE and other magazines—not exactly on autopilot but lacking the old juice I'd come to miss—and tending to my toddler son, these questions drift around my head like a dark scribble of tumbleweed. Perhaps the dip in my drive is par for the course. This is what women do—right?—dial back their expectations when they realize the odds of achieving great things they once imagined for themselves are still stupefyingly slim. I've actually had a pretty good run, supporting myself as a writer for the past decade; I won a journalism fellowship, and tackled bigger and bigger assignments with speed and alacrity that I didn't even know I had in me. Lately, though, that lovely feeling of, *whump*, connecting with the ball, swinging for the fences, has been vanishingly rare. Some days, it's even hard to remember that I used to think there was a purpose to work higher than keeping us in Huggies and beer.

Unable to quit peeping at my life through the Bob-prism, my thoughts keep drifting back to the four years I worked at *TNY* in the early '90s with a crew of a dozen or so bright men and women, all of us starting our careers after college. We were a remarkably amiable group, busy trying to amuse (or bed) one another and beat *High Times* at softball. Recognizing that instincts to separate from the pack could threaten the pleasure we took in each other's company, we never discussed our deepest professional dreams. But you could practically see the quivering, quasi-embarrassing longing for literary greatness—or at least respectable jobs a few rungs up—shimmering around our cubicles. I wonder whether these vibrations we generated as a group of pumped-up young people are still reverberating somewhere out there in the cosmos,

and if reconnecting with my old officemates might help me tap into that energy, brush the dust off my once pink and shiny hopes. I also wonder, with respect and a little envy, what the few of my former colleagues now playing at the top of their game—having reached the highest-tier masthead spots we all used to marvel at—have got that I ain't.

FIRE IN THE BELLY

Ambition is tidily defined by scientists as the will to pursue goals that may be just out of reach. Ambitious people who've achieved difficult goals don't say, "'Ah, now I can rest on my laurels,'" as Dean Simonton, PhD, a professor of psychology at the University of California, Davis, who studies achievement, tells me. "They set new goals and see how far they can go."

But everyone knows there's a lot of woolly individuality underlying motivation—making us crave recognition to varying degrees, causing us to undermine or be supportive of colleagues, or to try again if at first we don't succeed—that is hard to get at, and even harder to talk about. (Which is why, I imagine, several of my former colleagues politely decline my requests to discuss how their careers have unfolded.) Nevertheless, Neil Fiore, PhD, a Berkeley, California–based psychologist and author of *Awaken Your Strongest Self: Break Free of Stress, Inner Conflict and Self-Sabotage*, tells me that my diminished ambition fits a common pattern. In their twenties, optimistic, determined people "may in fact experience their most creative decade," he says. By 30, "most are still ambitious but know there's a game to be played to just hold on to [their jobs]" and have absorbed the dispiriting lesson that "some organizations punish excellence or standing out from the crowd and reward mediocrity." And around 40, a time of—eeek—"midlife transition," many ask themselves, "'Do I want to continue on this path, with this script, and this role? Or do I want to forge a new story and truly savor my remaining years?'"

One thing I can do to savor work again, according to Alex Stajkovic, PhD, an associate professor of management at the University of Wisconsin-Madison school of business, is to rebuild feelings of competency. Stajkovic—a world expert in self-efficacy (the perception of one's own capability)—believes "all human behavior" is determined by three factors: skill, the desire to achieve things with one's skills, and the belief that it will be possible to do so. To be ambitious, the last two are essential: "You have to have the fire in the belly and believe that you can" accomplish your goals, Stajkovic says. "We all know smart people—let's talk plainly—who had the ability to be medical doctors, say, but they just don't believe they can do it. Somewhere along the way family or school instilled in them that they were not good enough. Personally, what bugs me about this is the unrealized potential." I hear that. And when Stajkovic goes on to explain how self-efficacy can increase, my ears perk up. "Vicarious learning"—observing peers who have skills similar to our own, or even, frankly, a bit better—is one of the best ways we can help ourselves grow in our work, he says.

When I reconnect with Virginia Heffernan, who worked as a fact-checker at *TNY* when I was an assistant, her riff recalling our days at the magazine makes me smile. "My assumption was that if I ever got to the revered place, I'd hold my breath. And the only relief from barely stifled misery would be thinking, 'It's a privilege to work here,'" she writes in a long e-mail. "But the opposite was true: It was pure joy. It was corny. Everybody young seemed thrilled to be there, yet conscious they didn't want to seem TOO thrilled." It's reassuring that Virginia, now a TV critic for the *New York Times* with the power to spell the demise of a dopey sitcom with a single withering review, also remembers the pinch-me excitement of those early days. Though Virginia has a son a few months younger than mine and she jokes that lately her daydreams have to do with "being more organized," she also writes about the thrill of breaking new ground as a writer, covering the emergence of online video on the heels of her maternity leave last year. I'm encouraged to hear that she's moving forward, upward in her work, fully engaged.

Still, when Virginia goes on to mention that at *TNY* "being pushy or trying too hard was frowned upon," I find *myself* frowning, because now she's hit upon one not-so-fun aspect of the job: figuring out how to let your light shine at a place averse to attention-grabbing, but also one where young people who cornered the most face time with higher-ups generally did get ahead. It's a paradox that still irks my friend and onetime cubiclemate Kate Kinast, who quit her job at the magazine before her son was born seven years ago. "It really ached my ass," Kate says. "If you were like me and didn't have an outgoing personality or a mentor, you were stuck."

ONE OBVIOUS DRAWBACK OF AMBITION IS THAT IT ALWAYS THREATENS TO VEER INTO ARROGANCE, TO TURN US INTO JERKS WHEN WE'RE COMPETING FOR PROMOTIONS AND PERKS.

One obvious drawback of ambition is that it always threatens to veer into arrogance, to turn us into jerks when we're competing for promotions and perks. The guy who once snatched a fax from my hands so he could deliver it to the senior editor it was addressed to, making a lame joke about how I'd probably get waylaid gossiping en route to his office, springs to mind. *Godspeed, faxboy.* But then—flipping my stomach, aching my own ass—memories come rushing back of the weirdly brave and mousy way I too angled for some of that all-important face time at *TNY*. Writing stories on spec for the magazine's "The Talk of the Town" section was my bid to move beyond typing and filing. Hunched at my bedroom desk as the avenue noise outside crescendoed at 10 P.M., faded to a muffled whir at midnight, then went dead silent until gradually building up again at dawn, I put down my impressions of funny local events, checking my Webster's compulsively, striking lines in despair, then slowly, slowly finding new ones. With my heart pounding, I submitted many more stories than the magazine ever accepted. But whenever an editor called me upstairs to tell me one of my efforts was a go, I walked back to my desk with a beet-red face—hot from the stress of having to talk about the story and the pride that I'd actually nailed it, made hotter still by shame over feeling proud and worry that my officemates, who

I'd be rejoining in a minute, might mistake me for a shameless hustler. The video in my head of these perp walks still makes me wince—because, come to think of it, I'm still not sure how to go about improving my lot without apologizing for it, or, worse, coming off as a sharp-shouldered operator.

YOU ASKED FOR IT

In our twenties we're like ponies lined up before a race, nervously whinnying and eyeballing and occasionally nipping each other as we wait for the gates to fly open, without any clue about what we can do. But the advantage of having moved past that stage, I realize, is that with some self-reflection it becomes possible to analyze and understand the very moves that helped us run our own races successfully—and then repeat these moves so they become non-neurotic, merely civil habits of doing business. Speaking with Mark Rozzo, who agrees to talk if I promise not to make him "look like a twit," a vision of how to advance with dignity and decency—without looking like a twit—comes into focus.

After briefly working as an assistant when he got to the magazine, Mark, a soft-spoken guy with dark floppy hair who another colleague once described as "almost too talented," applied for and got a job responding to readers' letters. "I thought, 'I'm so badass: I'm 24, I get to write all day, and I've got an office with a window at *The New Yorker*.'" In addition to his letter-writing responsibilities, Mark contributed short reviews to the magazine's book section and blurbs about rock shows. (He played in his own band after-hours.) Eventually, though, he wanted to try his hand at bigger projects. Trouble was, Mark tells me, his "own little fiefdom wasn't geographically advantageous"—it didn't put him in contact with editors who might recognize he had something to offer—and he "felt wildly ambitious and lazy and clueless how to do it. To be a lovable person, you have to hate the process of getting ahead to some degree." As he approached 30—and had been moved into progressively smaller offices—Mark remembers feeling "low-level panic all the time."

"IT WAS USEFUL TO LEARN THAT SOMETIMES YOUR AMBITION CAN REALLY OUTSTRIP YOUR TALENT."

It's easy to burrow into bitterness when we feel overlooked. "I can be shy, and maybe I didn't cozy up enough to people," Mark says. But to his credit, Mark recalled a conversation he'd once had with the biographer Richard Reeves, a friend's stepfather, and realized that there might be a fairly straightforward way out of his quagmire. Reeves' advice was to "ask early and often"—aka, make clear to higher-ups exactly what you want to do, rather than waiting shy-violet-style for them to pluck you out of the flower patch. "I'd gotten opportunities by asking straight out of the gate," Mark says, referring to the letter-responding job. "But I went for years ignoring that lesson." He contacted *The Los Angeles Times* about writing a review for the paper's book section, and an editor there, impressed with Mark's clips, called back to offer him a column.

A year and a half later, Mark had lined up enough freelance work to leave the magazine, freeing him up to play music more seriously (earlier this year the band America released a cover of a song Mark wrote with his current band, Maplewood). Neatly, it also forced him to get over his heebie-jeebies about asserting himself: "No one else is going to do it for you." In 2005, when Jay Fielden, another former colleague of ours, who's now the editor in chief of *Men's Vogue*, offered Mark an articles editor job, he took it. "It's great to be wanted, and it's great to be wanted by people you respect," Mark says.

It occurs to me that I've asked plenty over the course of my own career. Remembering my own successes, I find myself sitting a bit taller, typing a bit faster. A few minutes after this rush of confidence, though, I feel it—like a cart atop a roller coaster—sliding slowly, then faster downhill. It's vexing that my sense of accomplishment is still vulnerable when memories of times when my ideas were not well received start tap-dancing in my brain.

ATTITUDE ADJUSTMENT

When I talk to Pete Wells, now the top editor of *The New York Times*' dining section, though, I am struck by his ability to learn from failure. Pete (with whom, it's true, I probably did spend too much time gossiping) was a talented writer in the *TNY*'s PR department when we worked there. But at the time, Pete tells me now, his efforts to launch his own journalism career were not going well, and one particularly "humbling and discouraging" early experience nearly defeated him. While he was still at *TNY*, he wrote a freelance piece for *GQ* that his editor then killed. This is not uncommon in the business, or in other creative fields such as screenwriting and advertising, where months of work can go up in smoke due to what might seem like a whimsical decision; when it happens, your friends buck you up, you try to convince yourself whoever kiboshed your project is insane, or you vow to bowl him over next time around. But Pete's reaction surprises me. "It didn't inspire me to try harder," he says. "It inspired me to give up for a while." After licking his wounds for more than a year, he says, looking back on the experience gave him "a more realistic view of what I could do. In hindsight, I [saw that] it was killed because it wasn't very good. I wasn't capable of writing a good story about that subject at that time. It was useful to learn that sometimes your ambition can really outstrip your talent." The upshot of this hard-to-admit epiphany? Back to his computer for a lot of brute hard work and honing of his craft. "Writing is cerebral, the product of conscious thought, and it seems like you should be able to just think it and get it out," he says. "But it's also like playing the piano: Practice matters."

True. And yet, the mother of all my work worries is that, now that I am a mother, I don't have what it takes to get back in the game wholeheartedly the way I want to, to grow as a writer, to put in the hours of necessary reading and late-night tappity-tap-tapping at the keyboard, to recover my determination.

STRONG MEDICINE

But this is where I'm hoping a little bit of Liesl Schillinger's uncanny verve and efficaciousness will rub off on me. A petite blond woman who walks and talks—no fewer than five languages—very, very fast, Liesl worked as a fact-checker for 12 years at *TNY* before editing the dance and theater listings there. In 2004–05, she wrote nearly 100 culture stories for *The New York Times* on top of her day job and eventually left the magazine to freelance. Liesl's work now appears in the Styles section or Book Review (among other departments) almost every week—complex, thought-provoking pieces that I can't believe she pulls off so consistently.

How does she do it? By staying glued *(Continued on page 326)*

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to her desk dawn to dusk and going out almost every night with writer friends, Liesl says. "I have to feel that fuel. A writer is not just hands at a keyboard. A writer is a social being, and part of being a writer is liking your life!" As we're speaking, Liesl is holed up at her parents' house in Virginia, working in their attic while she recovers from two broken wrists. Right after her injury (suffered on a sloshy wedding dance floor), she had two big stories due, and her mother came to her rescue—bringing her tea through the night so she could stay up gingerly typing in her splints. "I can't overemphasize how helpful it has been to have parents who are warm and genial but also workaholics," she says. "I didn't grow up thinking it was unfair for an adult to be freaking out about deadlines. If you're doing something you really believe in, it's rewarding. That's why you do it!"

As we speak, I see visions of me trotting to work up Fifth Avenue or off to a book party—always in the same black Agnès B. skirt that seemed both demure and sassy—and I remember how much fun it was to crack wise with kindred souls in the big city. And yet, several times during our conversation I am so chagrined about leaving my writer's life behind in New York that I feel the burn at the back of the throat that means I'm about to cry.

Colette Dowling, a therapist in New York who specializes in helping professional women, says women like me, who live independently through their twenties and thirties, flexing their intelligence and experiencing "unsullied" achievement, frequently experience severe "dimming of enthusiasm" for work once they marry and have kids. This is caused by a constellation of factors, but among them is the "contemptuous attitude toward mothers, even 'modern' mothers with careers" that many women harbor. "Women have more opportunities, and it really doesn't have to be this way at all," Dowling says. "But it's a real sticking point."

I've had very generous, encouraging mentors, male and female, who have told me I could do a lot with what I've got. My parents have always been, and my husband is now, supportive of my career. Yet thanks to whatever stew of sexist assumptions I've imbibed since girlhood, I can see that I'm feeling some disgust toward myself for making a U-turn away from the bright lights back to Wisconsin—interpreting that, and my desire to raise a family, as a sure sign that my conviction to work, and maybe even my talent as a writer, was and only ever will be meager.

But while I wait—fingers drumming louder and louder—for society to move past the tired conceit that women just aren't up to snuff professionally, I'm really glad I have my old colleagues. Remembering them some 15-plus years ago when we newly minted grown-ups toasted one another with martinis, feeling both spurious and suave, at the annual holiday party; hearing how they've mostly managed to navigate gracefully the inevitable disappointments and changing plans of adulthood; feeling their sympathies fly out to meet me—well, it's strong medicine, and if you're having trouble getting your motor revved, I recommend Googling the people you worked with in your first real job, too. There's something about the relationships you have with old colleagues, who could see your strengths and weaknesses and you theirs, that makes these bonds incredibly strong.

Strong enough that, when I whine to Liesl there's no way I can pull an all-nighter, she's not buying it: "You say you can't, but I'm saying you *could*," she says. "You're still learning the ropes of your new identity. But you'll figure it out."

Strong enough that, when I ask Virginia where she remembers me falling on a one-to-ten scale of ambitiousness, she says: "I think you were about a seven," and this seems as fundamentally right about me then as it does about me now, even despite my recent doubts.

Strong enough that, when I ask Mark to remind me why I wanted to be a writer in the first place, he doesn't skip a beat: "Every now and then, you might wonder why you didn't ask for some opportunity, or worry that your desk wasn't in the right place. But then you have to remind yourself that you're fortunate to have great conversations, read weird books, work with amazing people. It's supercool."

Strong enough that, when I ask Pete for advice on how to get up off my duff, he says something that literally sends a surge of excitement down my spine: "A lot of life seems plotless—marriage and kids does that. But I think giving yourself a plotline to life—whether that's writing a book or developing an area of real expertise—has enormous psychic benefit. I find it really cuts down on the existential dread."

Now, more than achieving whatever sparkly vision of literary stardom I once dreamed of, I want to find, yes, a plot that will keep my work life churning forward interestingly and hammer my career arc into a shape that pleases more for its sense of rightness than its greatness. A big challenge will be figuring out how to get two seemingly disparate but equally ambitious corners of my life—raising my boy and writing—to shake hands and be friends. But I'm already working on it. I want my son to understand that, in addition to being patient and adoring while he makes motor sounds running Hot Wheels up my legs for most of a morning, I am also a writer. He has a picture book with a drawing of a raccoon sitting at a typewriter. Lately I've been pointing to the raccoon and explaining that's what I do, too. Tipping his head to get a better taste of the word, he said it the other day for the first time: "Wridah." Yes, yes! "A writer," I keep repeating. "Mommy is a writer!" And thanks to my old friends, whose voices have replaced that old dirty tumbleweed with a chorus of efficacy-boosting encouragements, I don't feel like a fraud saying it anymore. I am a writer, with big thoughts and big dreams! □

SIGN OF THE TIMES

(Continued from page 279)

Washington. One of them was Judith Miller, the hard-charging chemical weapons and Al Qaeda reporter who was loathed by many in the bureau because of the stormy tenure she'd had there as an editor years before.

He also brought Patrick Tyler, his fishing buddy of three decades, back from the Moscow bureau, gave him the title of chief correspondent, and installed him in a large office right next to Abramson's. "That's how things are done at the paper," says Don Van Natta Jr., then a reporter in the bureau. "It truly is like the Kremlin. Moves are made that have symbolic value, and having Pat Tyler sit in the office that was directly adjacent to Jill's symbolically showed that he was on deck."

Abramson felt undermined; Raines was on a tear about Washington being competitively behind. To her, it felt like he was trying to run her shop from New York. "To be fair to Howell," says Steven Weisman, another reporter in the bureau, "he was so aggravated with Jill because he felt like, 'Hey, this is what it's like to be Washington bureau chief. You're always getting second-guessed by New York, so welcome to the NFL. Deal with it.'"

"I did want the Washington Bureau to catch up with the *Washington Post* on intelligence and national security stories," Raines writes in an e-mail. "Any tension between me and the Bureau's editors was related to their being scooped."

When a young reporter and Raines favorite named Jayson Blair was sent down to cover the DC-area sniper shootings, he delivered incredible scoops to the paper, so incredible that those in the bureau covering the story didn't buy it. Editors in DC passed on to New York that sources within the FBI were telling them that Blair was getting his facts wrong. Raines calls "totally fictional" any assertion that he was alerted to such concerns. But when Blair received a coveted internal head-pat called the Publisher's Award in late 2002, bureau staffers wondered if Raines was trying to tell them something. "I think Howell's motivation in doing that was to sort of stick it to the bureau a little bit," Van Natta says. "And stick it to Jill, too."

Meanwhile, in the run-up to the Iraq war, Judith Miller was filing stories datelined Washington that lent credence to the Bush administration's claim that Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction. Miller did not respond to my e-mails, but Keller maintains that the self-described "Miss Run Amok" was filing most of her anonymous-source-filled stories straight to editors in New York, or even to Raines himself. ("At no time did Judy ever file anything directly to me," Raines replies. "For better or worse, I first saw her stories when they had been cleared by our Washington Bureau and Foreign Desk and put into the paper.") In any event, there are differing opinions as to whether Abramson, as bureau chief, could have been more vigilant of the coverage, which turned out to be often wrong and which forced Miller out of the paper in 2005.

"The problem in Judy's case was that she managed to have so many bosses at once that it was