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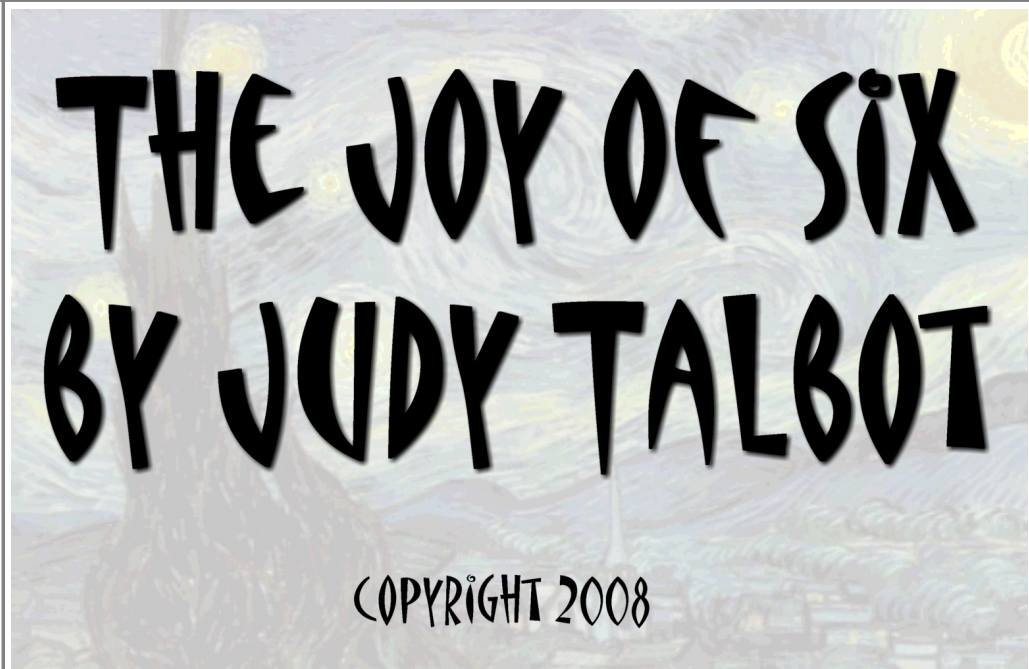
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Of the daily challenges presented to a single mother of six children, none equal the energy expended in the perpetual search for money. A woman can either work two or three jobs at minimum wage or try to sell her body for a slightly higher scale of pay. With the relatively sexless body of a nine-year old boy, I could not imagine anyone buying it. Since I lacked promiscuity, education, a base of salient skills, and had six children under ten, I began to realize I was nothing more than a target. This particular target set out a few decades ago to find a job, become educated, and raise those kids alone.

In a strange set of circumstances, due I am sure, to my physically overstressed, and deliriously stretched-out mentality I began to recognize the presence of more than just my own brood. There began to appear on a daily basis, metaphysical personifications with actual personalities distinguishable by their behavior. In spite of my intensified attention to their detailed intervention into my life, I found it strangely satisfying to attribute their unusual activities to that of my children. As such, I began to refer to them as "The Bodies": Nobody, Everybody, Somebody, and Anybody.

While learning their names and idiosyncratic proclivities, I discovered my favorite among the strangely non-physical beings temporarily inhabiting my home. Nobody loved vegetables and Nobody ate them. Nobody completed assigned homework, and Nobody followed my organizational chart. Nobody remained polite and cheerful and Nobody washed dishes. Nobody picked their clothes up from the floor and Nobody claimed ownership of the jeans thrown there.

In spite of my extraordinarily reasonable and especially pleasant nature, I was surprised by the specious presence of Somebody who lost my cranberry sweater, misplaced my Libra ring, removed the covers and pillows from my bed, and in fact was a suspect in the loss of my favorite champagne flute, an elegant piece of crystal stem-ware I especially loved. I often envisioned a world in which I might own two of them, and regularly hid money in a sacrificial sugar bowl, hoping to find a duplicate. The bowl, the money, and the flute were quite simply missing. The rhetoric went something like this:

"Somebody broke my champagne flute, ravished my sugar bowl, and absconded with \$3.42!" True, I was somewhat hysterical, and may have been screaming, however I demanded an immediate resolution. My eldest countered with her inherited ideological preference for non-biased accusations:

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"Why blame Somebody when it could have been Anybody?" Daughters two and three agreed, arguing for the defense, insisting that Everybody had access to the cupboard, and Nobody may have actually been the culprit.

"Nobody?" I was stunned. "How could it be Nobody?"

It was obvious to me that Somebody took these things because they were in fact gone, and perhaps had broken my one and only remnant of another life. For reasons beyond my control, the children blamed Anybody and Everybody, an accusation far beyond spectacular which seemed relatively outrageous, however, I could imagine such an act of agrestic behavior by unscrupulous persons such as those referred to by my children. Since Everybody hangs out at the mall, stays out late, smokes cigarettes, talks incessantly on the telephone, and uses bad words, I could easily be swayed. There were, in fact, dozens of their pilfering pals whose fingerprints were daily wiped away. The miscreant might just be Anybody, a mysteriously vague personification, not entirely trustworthy. At the end of the investigation, Nobody claimed responsibility.

Since Nobody confessed and with the evidence removed, we concluded that Nobody should be punished, however, when Nobody is liable, nothing gets done. When I confronted them, my children assured me that I was biased against Everybody, their favorite of the strangely iconoclastic representational bodies residing in our home.

"Since, as you say, Everybody always behaves badly," daughter's two and three proclaimed, "and Anybody could be guilty as charged, Somebody might consider your conclusions slightly confusing".

The clarity of my argument took a mercurial drop as my children turned it against me and I seemed to have lost another battle. Nobody seemed interested in the issues, and with Nobody as an ally, Everybody seemed to be satisfied.

When the dog produced five puppies, Nobody came to my aid and Everybody hid behind Anybody with an alibi. Nobody verified the father of this error in judgment, which led me back to the ongoing, but unresolved argument of assessing ownership of jeans thrown disrespectfully to the ground. The girls all wore the same size which led me to begin an investigation into certain very specific worn spots accompanied by appliquéd butterflies, and various other relatively personalized creations and tell-tale indications of derelict ownership.

In a moment of unforeseen frustration, I ran screaming through the house in an unprofessional, albeit succinct, non-prejudicial rant.

"I'm throwing all of these jeans in the garbage!" I stated further that, "Persons owning these jeans and those who knew the gender of the dog must be held liable for their actions". Emboldened, I added that, "People must ultimately be held responsible for their actions."

Unbelievably, daughters, four and five engaged in a strategy that included youth and innocence as a viable defense against sexual knowledge, an argument I was not about to enter, and most certainly Anybody could lose, as such, Everybody might claim a significant victory. As for the jeans, Nobody claimed them and I laundered them in silence.

The dog, apparently a female, was named "Gretchen" as my children seemed to think she was a "Dutch Terrier", a previously undiscovered breed, and bestowed upon her a fabricated pedigree. Gretchen, a dog with neurotic tendencies was terrified by the presence of the children and slowly but surely, and unknown to me, deposited all five of her puppies under my bed.

Also unknown to me was the fact that I was allergic to puppy dander. Everybody blamed my extreme bronchial distress to the fact that I worked in a bar eight hours a night, and spent eight hours a day in a "sick" office building. Somebody suggested I stay home, clean house and

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make cookies, an excellent, but thoroughly impractical solution. After much discussion, Everybody concluded we must remove the animals. Anybody could see the logic of it and although Nobody objected, the eldest daughter was sent out on her bicycle with a small lunch, a wagon, and six "for-free" dogs. I was miraculously "cured", returned to work, and food was on the table again.

When daughter number five began bizarre episodes of limping, and doctors suggested to me that her behavior was a production of symptoms associated with a psychoneurosis motivated by my neglect of her, I wondered if this child was emulating her sister who had also lost her ability to walk for a period of time. I pulled that one around in a wagon because she said, "I can't walk." That child was often found napping on the sidewalk by neighbors, who actually believed her and considered me a nut.

Because I worked three jobs and left my children to their imagination, I suspect the arrival of the personifications of parental authority absolved my children from the exacting consequences of believable behavior. When the cat ran into a car, I was in another county, far away in a hospital attempting to manage the operation of daughter number four, a child who required screws in her thigh. The apparent theory for her slipping epiphysis was associated with a congenital factor however under sedation this child admitted to stomping aluminum cans into a kind of "shoe-heel" and stomped on them daily for fun. The doctor who performed the operation lost his son on the eve of the operation due to a broken neck achieved while performing on a trampoline. I had no money to pay the doctor and the doctor did not bill me.

Upon our arrival back home at last, we placed the crutches for my daughter at the bottom of the stairs. The cat, with a broken leg, and wearing a cast, sat quietly next to the rather large barrier, a sentinel perhaps. Visiting children came with their mothers and were amazed by the size of the crutches for such a small cat. Tutu, a rare "Chocolate-Point" Siamese was no doubt expensive in the past, but had fallen on hard times, landing on our doorstep and scooped up for play by daughter number five who dressed her in frilly doll's clothing and pushed her around in a wicker basket banging recklessly into the furnishings.

When her leg was healed and the cast removed, Tutu sprayed the sofa I designed and waited six months to receive. On the day I removed the plastic that cat not only dictated its territorial arena with a disgusting skunk-like odor, it rendered the sofa helpless by tearing to shreds the arms, sides and back of its frame. Nobody knew of course the cat was a male, and Nobody assisted me with its removal.

Tutu disappeared one day along with the dog, her five puppies, and some turtles. The turtles were actually unintentionally ground up after they had become seriously strange looking, and were unidentifiable as a species. A Great Dane was then introduced to our family by daughter number five, a dog so large that I thought it must be a horse. I noticed it while painting the kitchen ceiling a special color. I thought tomato soup red would work quite nicely with the yellow shag rug I had kind of destroyed when I attempted to create kinetic sculpture, which exploded during an experiment. It had not occurred to me that adding one more drop of catalyst would produce such an effect in the resin.

I snipped the "shag" down with manicure scissors believing that I might manufacture a kind of "short shag", maybe something unusual, pulling the hardened acrylic shards which had burst into glass-like pieces. I believed there existed the possibility of a "golf-link-like short, grassy carpet. The tomato-soup ceiling was almost a success but had a "lumpy" appearance, the result of the hardened acrylic thrown by the blast. While drying, pieces of pasta thrown previously, slipped a bit and created a bas-relief effect, a kind of Art Deco over-all arrangement; an interesting almost sunburst look, useful perhaps in Xanado.

One of my four jobs involved the completion of 8"x10", detailed ink renderings with copy, of fashions shown in local boutiques. I was paid \$25 per each piece, which were then selected to be advertised in "The Bee", a Marin County publication, and considered to be quite prestigious.

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I pinned the clothing to the tomato-soup walls of the dining room to achieve fluidity and often spent many sleepless nights engaged in the project. While working at an off-premises location, Somebody removed the seriously expensive dresses from the wall leaving me with nothing to render and nothing to return. I was sued of course, but with no tactile resources, Nobody collected, reassuring me of the fact that Nobody would stand by me. In the meantime and for reasons unknown to me, my children were adamant that the Great Dane should live with us, an absurd option of course since there was no money for food. Happily, that animal left through the back door on the same evening of the day he was dragged through the front. Somebody must have left the door open! I began to look at these creatures as a happy accident, something like a solution to the extraordinary problems that had become a barrier while raising six children. I liked them and remained positive in spite of the incredibly negative behavior attributed to them. I liked blaming them for bad behavior and I especially liked our discussions about them. When Everybody was using drugs, daughter number one removed herself from her infatuation with that relationship, finding it exclusive of her siblings. Nobody told her to quit and Nobody was amazed. Because my children were collectively against anything I advocated, I used whatever measures were available to me to police their behavior.

In spite of the fact that my easel was situated in the dining room, and painting was an avenue devoted to the notion of income, my son insisted on bouncing his basketball against the canvas, a strange behavior I found both interesting and annoying. A commissioned painting requires a specific result, unlike creative adventures which allow for spontaneous reactions, say serendipity. In the unlikely event of a sponsor spending money on a painting created absent that sponsor's particular investment in the ideation, most artists are unpaid. That my adorable son could enhance my work with his basketball is no more unrealistic than my own expectations.

Not long after the arrival of the unexpected bodies, an unexpected opportunity arose to move three thousand miles from the strange and often misunderstood neighborhood in which my children and I occupied. The person I promised to marry in exchange for the opportunity to survive elected to force an ultimatum. I could either marry the guy or lose our home. Few decisions were made in less time.

Not only did I sell every piece of furniture not nailed to the floor, I sold furnishings actually nailed to the floor, including every appliance that came with the bloody semi-ownership of the condominium, including the bathroom fixtures. With an array of checks from an astounding number of accommodating neighbors, I found an agent of Cadillac who was happy to pay me to drive across the country in their stunning white, boat-like car, upon which I balanced two beautiful bicycles. The experience will live forever in the minds of my children and I doubt anyone in their right mind could ever reproduce such an event. I awakened my children at 3:00 am to see an extraordinary circumstance. In Salt Lake City, the sky actually created an umbrella of falling stars surrounding the available space with a spectacular show produced by the lack of artificial lights. Unbelievably stunning, a show of magic, something my children would never again witness.

The trip to California with six children was a bit of an illusion, something an intelligent person would refer to as a fantasy, however, in 1973, all things seemed possible, including a home for my children. Nobody led the way and ended our traveling at the northern-most corners of a place in Marin County. Somebody found a place to stay and Everybody loved it. The really strange part of the process began the following day. Nobody was able to cash the deposited checks, a rather positive experience since all of the purchases including the rent were based on that transaction, however, the checks could not be verified. Since the bank was incapable of turning the deposits into cash, the account was in effect frozen, an operational, and strange effect of the deposited checks by persons who wrote them to me for the sale of items that did not all belong to me. It was becoming increasingly clear to me that I was about to become a criminal. Of what nature I was unclear, but I suspected Nobody would come to my aid and in the end I would require the assistance of Somebody or in fact Anybody with a legal background. However, moving three thousand miles seemed to cool the professed ardor of my intended, and

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he was quietly assuaged with the ownership of my darling home, leaving me free to wander for which I was grateful.

Finding a home for six children and one adult in the 70's proved to be a challenge. The home I chose to rent did not allow children, so I lied and said I had none. We moved in, all seven of us, along with our metaphysical recreations, three pillows and a coffee pot. The rent would of course become an issue due to the freeze on the account, and I was forced to return the fire-engine red sports car that did not start which was in fact a blessing. With no way to attach the money, the used car dealer was unable to manage the disposition and just picked it up.

In the meantime I found a waitress position which allowed me to "steal" food and toilet paper from the restaurant and feed my children. Nobody objected, and I continued to become a felon, a career objective that Somebody considered difficult to comprehend, and a course of action perceived by Anybody as unwise. While slicing turkey one day I recognized the fact that Everybody was open to criminal behavior, and Nobody would protect them from prosecution. With my first paycheck I reimbursed my employer and begged to be forgiven. Nobody was, as usual, there for me and I was fired. My landlord, an unwilling participant in an ongoing lawsuit against him for allowing children to live in that complex, caved under the pressure and forced me to leave. By the time I returned home on Christmas Eve, the children were all sitting outside on the grass, the eldest held the coffee pot.

If Somebody had an idea Nobody was discussing it and if Everybody thought we were beaten by this we looked toward Anybody with a positive solution. I decided to hide the children once again and find a home, this time with no money at all, a delicate task, but not entirely impossible. The kids and I were gathered at a gas station when it occurred to me that the bank might finally have released the checks written for the stuff I sold. As amazing as it may seem the bank actually allowed me to withdraw almost \$3,000.00, an astronomical amount of money finally released. We ate something other than tea and toast for the first time in three months. After renting a room at Howard Johnson for showers, clean sheets, and television, we snuggled into a discussion of room service. Somebody suggested that Everybody would benefit from a walk to the nearest fast-food joint, an option Nobody found satisfactory, and was concluded to be thrift-oriented. In the end, the desire to eat actual food out-weighed all practical other-oriented solutions. Whatever happiness may be derived while raising children, the joy of feeding them trumps all others, the prospect of not feeding them is in fact the most deleterious.

Sitting in the booth of a restaurant with a serious claim to the best seafood in the world, my darlings ordered hamburgers with cheese.

"We don't like fish," my daughters proclaimed, "especially fish with bones".

Somebody suggested lobster as it has none, a fact Everybody agreed upon and Anybody could see that was the best choice. Nobody, once again came to my aid.

"Lobster it is," I declared, and lobster it was for our re-entry into the world of normalcy.

Albeit dinner blew a magnificent hole in our funds it also produced a significant burst of energy and emotional well-being. We found a very simple home; an extremely rural cottage, the kind some might describe as "shack-like", available however to mothers with children. By padding my resume with outrageous lies, I found a job and bought a car that not only started on command, but had a functioning reverse gear, and joined other working moms dropping their kids off at school.

In the end it was a simple project: a task devoted to the ordinary notion of keeping six children alive; an idea developed while skirting them through negotiations with an exceptional parent and the evolution of an association with unrealistic and entirely imaginative personalities, all willing to support their creative endeavors, specific ideations, and loving pursuits. Through a

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prism of four decades past, I cannot see how it was done, but can only recall the joy of raising six children on my own.

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**Judy Talbot** recently published her book *An Island Full of Laughter: The Humor of Whidbey Island*. Her short fiction has appear in *SNReview*. Currently she is finishing her dissertation for her doctorate from Union Institute & University.