

One Good Enemy

[By Holly Lisle](#)

Once upon a time, (back in 1985), I quit my nursing job to write a book. I was twenty-five years old, my husband made enough money that if we were careful we could pay bills and I could still stay home with both kids and work on the book, and I could have the chance I wanted to do what I wanted with my life.

So I stayed home, and I wrote the book (it was a romance novel) and it was ... well, it was, at best, mediocre, and then only if I wish to be kind to my fledgling effort. Actually, it was bad. I was looking at writing romances as my ticket to freedom because they seemed easy to write, not because they were what I loved beyond words. My lack of passion came through on the page, and when I sent the book out, it came back. Repeatedly.

I was crushed. I cried. I sank into a funk. I'd been so sure that all I had to do to make it as a writer was write, and publishers would buy what I wrote. Well, I was young and naive, and I didn't yet realize that in order to sell what you do, in order to sell someone else on the words you've put on the page, you need to put your heart and your soul and perhaps even a pound of your flesh into them. You have to take your life and burn it onto the paper. At twenty-five, my experiences with life were still fairly limited, but even so, I could have done better than I did.

So.

Once upon a time, having quit a good Baylor weekend nursing job to spend a year writing a book, and having failed at the writing of said book, I had to go back to nursing with my tail tucked between my legs, while my husband and my family and his family all said, "Well, we didn't think it was going to work

out anyhow, and we were right, and now you know you can't make it as a writer." And other equally encouraging things.

I worked the new nursing job. I wrote some short stories in my spare time (now science fiction, because I was beginning to understand that I needed to be working on stories I cared deeply about) but everything I wrote came back. Everything. Time passed.

In 1988, I managed to place a story ("Beneath the Wailing Wind") with a magazine that paid in copies (**Cosmic Landscapes**). The editor, Dan Petipas, wrote me an enthusiastic note, and I danced around in glee and told my husband and my family that I'd finally sold something.

The response was underwhelming.

I hadn't made a million dollars, and everyone told me the "sale" was nice but if no money exchanged hands, well ... writing was really a waste of my time, wasn't it? From their perspective, it wasn't even a very good hobby, because at least with crocheting, you got a nice afghan for all the time you invested.

The story never made it into print. Dan changed the magazine format and I lost my computer copy, so "Beneath the Wailing Wind" died to the world. But in the meantime, I'd gotten in on the ground floor of a new SF/fantasy writers' group, and had become editor of the newsletter because I had more publishing experience than anyone else in the group. I did have that one acceptance letter, after all. And I had written a whole book, even if it sucked.

I kept writing. I kept not selling. My marriage, which had been a serious mistake, (I married a man whom I discovered much later was both a closet homosexual and a pedophile), hit the skids in a big way.

I was still nursing.

I was still writing.

And suddenly I was looking for a way out of a private hell, and facing off against a determined enemy, who told me point-blank, "You've never been out on your own. You'll never make it without me."

Galvanizing words, those.

"You'll never make it without me."

My response, never voiced out loud, was, "Oh, yeah? Just watch me."

1989. I sold my guitar and my typewriter and a couple of other things to get together my first month's rent, and got myself a cheap place near where he lived (because I had pushed for joint custody, and had gotten it. I did research when things were going to pieces and discovered that the only kids not terribly scarred by the divorce of their parents were those whose parents both remained equally involved in their lives. This statistic did not include children whose fathers turned out to be child molesters, but I didn't know anything about Barry's preferences yet. I just knew he didn't like me.) I worked my Baylor weekend nursing job to pay my bills, and I took care of my kids, and in my spare time I wrote.

God, I wrote like a fiend.

Why?

Because of that smug smile, and that damnably calm little assertion—"You'll never make it without me."

Because of the implication behind it—**you are nothing on your own.**

Because I knew he wanted me to fail; because I knew that he, with his country club membership and Jaycees activities and the vice-presidency of his father's business, saw himself as a

success; because I knew he took great pleasure in the fact that I lived in a tiny little apartment with cardboard boxes for furniture.

1991. I wrote, and the book I wrote was **Fire in the Mist**.

You'll have heard of that one if you've read my work. It was my first published novel. I sent it out, and the first publishing house I sent it to called me back a month later to buy it. One month from mail to sale.

A bit of magic I never expected, though I did dare to hope. Aside from two sonnets that I sold to **Aboriginal**, (\$25 apiece), it was my first real sale. My first validation. My first proof (aside from the nursing job) that I could make my dreams into reality.

Why did **Fire in the Mist** sell?

Because I wrote my heart and my life and my anger into it; because I transmuted my pain into story; because I was battling against an enemy and my blood boiled and I raged inside and I was determined that I **would ... not ... fail**. I swore that I could not fail—that no matter how long it took, no matter how hard I had to drive myself, I would show him that I could make it without him. He would eat his words.

And he ate his words. I sold enough books to go full-time. My books showed up with great regularity in the local bookstores. People mentioned them to him. I became known in town as a Real Writer. I was a guest at conventions and conferences; I was nominated for and sometimes won awards; all of this showed up in the local newspaper, alongside pictures of smiling me. I knew that knife twisted, and I took pleasure in the knowledge.

This isn't an enlightening, warm-fuzzies sort of story. This is, instead, a tale of revenge won with no weapon but a computer and a brain; a tale of anger and hurt and disillusionment transmuted into gold; a story, finally, of

growing beyond the need for revenge.

Finally, years later, I could look beyond showing him that I could make it without him. Finally, I could walk away from twisting the knife, and take pleasure in my accomplishments because they were mine, and because I loved my work. Finally I buried the ghost of "You'll never make it without me."

But that came later. Much later. And without the drive I got from needing my revenge; I don't know that it would have come at all. I might have stayed with my nursing job, unhappy because I wanted something different, dreaming of writing without ever making it happen.

I might have felt the desire without ever fulfilling it; I might have longed and yearned and done nothing.

Failing that first time left its scars. I can still, after all these years, close my eyes and feel the humiliation and the shame of thinking I could win, and losing so publicly. Fear of feeling that humiliation again could have kept me in a cage of my own creation for the rest of my life. Without the push of "You'll never make it without me," I might have succumbed to the fear, and in so doing failed myself.

Now.

Here is where this grim little tale reaches out and touches you.

When you're complaining that you aren't getting enough support for your writing; when you're down because everything you write is coming back; when you aren't burning when you put the words on the page and the stories you tell come only from your head, and not from your soul; when you are praying that things will get easier ... maybe you need to stop and consider the possibility that you're praying for the wrong thing.

Maybe you don't need a friend to tell you what you want to

hear, to cheer you up, to make you feel good about yourself.

Maybe you don't need positive feedback, warm fuzzies, understanding and compassion, people who will believe in you.

Maybe what you should be praying for is one good enemy.

NOTE: If this article resonates with you, and you want to meet other writers who share your passion and who are working in a friendly, supportive environment, [come hang out with us and make progress on your writing in my free writing community.](#)

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