

## GOING IT ALONE:

HOW NATIONAL MAGAZINE FREELANCERS  
STRUCTURE THEIR WORK TO MAKE MONEY,  
FIND PURPOSE, AND IMPROVE THEIR LIVES

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ANALYSIS

### Chapter Five: Professional Analysis

#### **Hed: The 10 Commandments Of Magazine Freelancing**

Dek: Twelve seasoned pros and green freelancers alike share the keys to making it on your own.

I don't do well in offices. At my desk I get jittery, then disinterested. I run out the clock surfing the internet until quitting time, then go home and do the work I was supposed to be doing at "work" because my brain turns on at 6 p.m. (Former bosses, if you're reading this, I'm sorry—it's not you, it's me.)

I just turned 23, and the prospect of doing *that* for the rest of my life is horrifying.

It scares me less than everything that's terrifying about going freelance, which is why I chose to study other freelancers: I wanted to know everything about how they worked, the nitty gritty of all aspects of their lives, professional and personal.

I'm intrigued by the profession itself as the act of rejecting a reliable salary and employer-provided healthcare for a life of solitude and sporadic paychecks seems more like a calling than a job. Indeed, the writers in this story got into freelancing for a multitude of reasons: Some were laid off from staff jobs and took the plunge right away; others job-searched for years before realizing an increasingly volatile publishing industry provided even less security. Some wanted to report and write for a personal cause, and others' personal blogs became full-time jobs.

Some invest and reinvest in their personal brands with the fervor of venture capitalists but still treat their work as their art. Some write three stories a day and tweet hundreds of times a month; others keep their heads down for months at a time, surfacing only to publish a high-profile investigation that's talked about long after they've moved onto the next adventure.

All rant about declining rates, kvetch over greedy copyright stipulations, and feel a very human twinge of anxiety when the work dries up from time to time. But it's that shared human experience that interests me most. That a tight-knit cohort of writers who reckon with rejection and fear on a daily basis is out there, thriving on a currency of life experiences that no one with a day job could hope to deal in, is invigorating.

I originally wanted to make their knowledge my knowledge for the thoroughly selfish reason of finding a way to navigate a world of shrinking magazine staffs and make it work for me, the would-be magazine writer. Along the way, I realized that there must

be other panicky 23-year-olds, or 33-year-old laid-off editors, or 43-year-old career-changers, who could benefit from my findings.

What follows is the combined insight of 12 working independent writers, 20-somethings and retirees alike, with freelance tenures of 10 months to 40 years. They're predominately sourced from my own health- and fitness-oriented professional circle, which explains why you'll see a rather homogenous lineup publications throughout. I know I learned something, and with any luck, you will, too.

### **1: Attack your freelancing fears**

Going freelance typically means quitting a job, and the prospect of deliberately walking away from a source of stability (and healthcare) is presumably what keeps plenty of capable staff writers and editors from making the jump. And for those who end up freelancing after being laid off, the jolt of losing a job and taking on personal business responsibilities could be burdensome. Instead, these freelancers embraced the first-year frenzy to build solid foundations for their independent careers.

Eva Holland is a Yukon territory-based freelancer who quit her historical researcher job in 2013 to pursue a career writing magazine features, at a time when her existing freelance income was sparse. "I was making under a thousand dollars a month from writing when I quit my day job," Holland says. "I gave up my apartment and lived out of a suitcase for a year and a half."

Two LA-based freelance magazine writers, marijuana reporter Amanda Chicago Lewis and pop culture and gender writer Ann Friedman, entered the freelance world after being laid off from their jobs (Lewis from BuzzFeed in 2016, Friedman from *GOOD*

*Magazine* in 2012). Both women immediately found ways to monetize things they'd already been working on to support themselves in the transition.

Friedman's first freelance checks came from \$50 pie charts she made sporadically for *The Hairpin*, which she ramped up after being laid off from *GOOD Magazine* in June 2012. "When I was laid off, I was like 'Okay, what do I have that I can monetize here?' And I went back to *The Hairpin* and said, 'Do you want me to make one of these per week and will you pay me something?'"

Lewis, who had been covering marijuana legalization for BuzzFeed at the time of her layoff, used a trip to a Las Vegas weed conference (which BuzzFeed had already paid for) to look for story ideas. What resulted was a 5,000-word feature in *GQ*, which she published 10 months later. After the initial panic, she recalls the energy derived from a modest chip on one's shoulder.

"There's this slight momentum or buzz when you leave somewhere and you can capitalize on that," says former BuzzFeed News reporter Amanda Chicago Lewis, who left the company's LA bureau in November 2016. "I was just spurred to action in a really intense way. I met with a lot of editors and talked to a lot of people in the month and a half after I left BuzzFeed."

## **2: Pitch with a (business) plan**

Time is money when you're running your own business. For freelance magazine writers, that means maintaining a ratio of accepted pitches versus time spent researching that keeps the solo enterprise in the black.

I asked every freelancer in this story how she manages the risk of researching pitches that may or may not land, naively expecting each to rattle off a number that reflected their own golden ratio. I was, of course, frustrated by their answers—there is no golden ratio because there’s too much subjectivity, intuition, skill, and luck involved to quantify a research/reward strategy (before factoring in assignments they’d received unsolicited, of course). They’re writers, after all, not risk-pedaling financiers.

But then I said to heck with it, let’s quantify it anyway because any outside observer can see the economics at work from a perspective of abstraction. Not including assignments provided by editors, the formula to estimate revenue earned from any given pitch is this:

$$\frac{\text{(Sum of projected fees from getting a pitch accepted at each publication pitched)}}{\text{Total outlets pitched}} \times \text{Pitching success rate}$$

A freelancer’s success rate is like a baseball player’s batting average: It means nothing to the individual pitch, but the aggregate means everything. And, understandably, discussions about rates tend to be privileged within writing circles, so we’ll operate within the realm of realistic hypotheticals for this section. To explain the formula, let’s apply it to Eva Holland’s pitching strategy.

Holland is a writes features exclusively, so she publishes about six stories a year and estimates her pitching success rate to be about 1 in 5, or 0.20. When researching a pitch, she maintains a shortlist of three or four outlets that seem like the best fit. “After

that, I work down the list,” she says. “If it’s a story I’m really attached to, I’ll go to a lower paying outlet.”

For this example, let’s say Holland’s top three outlets will pay \$5,000 for a research-intensive feature pitch, and the next two offer \$3,000. Here’s the math:

$$\frac{(\$5,000 + \$5,000 + \$5,000 + \$3,000 + \$3,000 = \$21,000)}{5 \text{ outlets}}$$

X

0.20 success rate

In this hypothetical scenario, Holland’s attempt earns her \$840 on average. But if Holland makes the attempt five times, pitching all five outlets, her average earning becomes \$4,200.

It’s safe to say these freelancers aren’t running this calculation each time they send a pitch, but when you ask them how they manage the risk of pitch research, the logic is there. When researching pitches, Friedman keeps in mind “a small group of editors who I’ve written for repeatedly, and if it’s relevant to them, I’ll come up with some ideas about how it might fit for my top choice,” Friedman says. “If they don’t seem interested, then I go down the list.”

Each time freelancers like Friedman and Holland go down the list, they spend more time retooling the pitch for each subsequent outlet. Years of assessing this risk provides freelancers with the discretion to intuitively know whether a tip or fleeting idea is worth exploring, based on the potential payouts and chance of success. That, plus the

projected revenue from assignments he or she didn't have to pitch, is a freelancer's business model.

Experienced feature writers like Holland and Friedman can gamble on longer pre-reporting periods, then, because they know their chance of reaping a high-paying assignment is good enough to be sustainable. Green freelancers, by contrast, are more inclined to play small ball.

New Mexico-based freelancer Eric Killelea went full-time freelance in February 2017, and he estimates his pitching success rate to be between 1-in-8 and 1-in-10, or 0.125 to 0.10. As such, he relies on steady assignments, such as a monthly column with *Rolling Stone*, to finance the gambles he makes on feature assignments. He says he'd like to be a full-time freelance feature writer someday, and although he's currently researching a feature pitch on an Alaskan whale poaching, he's judicious with his time. "I'm not digging through FOIA files right now because I haven't gotten any sort of green light," he says.

There's nothing wrong with swinging for the fences, but until you become the Hank Aaron of freelance magazine writing, make sure you have enough base hits to stay in the league.

### **3: Travel on the cheap**

It's no secret that magazine expense budgets are shrinking, and as many of the freelancers in this story told me, that means reporting trips are getting shorter and tougher to justify. The reality is that if you want to travel to report and find new stories (as these

freelancers wish they could do more often), you may have to do it on spec, but that doesn't mean you have to lose money on the deal. It just means you have to get creative.

On two separate occasions since 2015, New York City-based freelance outdoor writer and content creator Lauren Steele has pitched feature stories that required reporting in foreign countries. In 2016, she pitched *Rolling Stone* a story on being in Havana, Cuba for President Donald Trump's inauguration. "I said I was going to Cuba, and *Rolling Stone* said, 'Awesome, we want the story,'" Steele says. The problem was, Steele didn't have a plane ticket to Cuba, or the money to spec the entire trip.

"Oh shit, I've got to get a ticket to Cuba!" she recalls thinking when the pitch was accepted. So she reached out to a Cuban tourism bureau she'd interviewed for previous stories and set up an exchange: While on the ground in Cuba, Steele promised to source five blog posts for the tourism agency and have her photographer shoot image assets, which she'd combine into five short tourism blogs when she returned to New York City. In return, the Cubans hooked her up with plane tickets and lodging for her and her photographer, which allowed her to travel on assignment for *Rolling Stone* without asking the publication to cover her expenses.

Steele ran a similar play in 2015. While trolling an Italian soccer internet forum, she discovered a once-brilliant Chilean soccer team staffed by miners, the same miners from the 2010 Copiapó mining accident that made global headlines. This time, she hadn't even gotten a pitch accepted, but she knew she wanted the story, so contacted another local tourism department and asked for help. The tourism department, eager to get the miners' story to American audiences, covered airfare and lodging for Steele and her photographer, provided a translator, and brought her to the remote town of El Salvador to

cover the team. After pitching a series of outlets, Steele eventually got the story published with *VICE*, collecting her fee without incurring any travel cost.

“It’s about putting your tail between your legs and realizing the world is so big,” Steele says. “You’ve got to make people bet on you.”

And if you are putting the trip on spec, remember to pack a lunch. “Raisin Bran is a secret,” Lewis says. “I’m not joking, like bringing Raisin Bran saves me so much money when I go to Vegas for work.”

#### **4: Find stability in tumult**

When starting out as a freelancer, it’s important to remind yourself that it’s all going to be okay. The sentiment is just as important to seasoned freelancers, who grow thick skin to weather the tumult of rising and falling fortunes. When shit hits the fan, breathe and learn from your mistakes, then move on.

Minnesota-based health and wellness freelancer Elizabeth Millard has weathered two periods of economic hardship since becoming fully independent in 2001. At first, she hit the ground sprinting as a tech writer covering the Dot Com boom. Millard remembers being up to her elbows in 5,000-word feature assignments at \$1 and \$2 per word, feeling on top of the world. Then the bubble burst.

“Almost overnight, they’re like ‘everything is closing down; there’s no money, bye.’” Millard says. “So when that happened, you’re kind of left scrambling. And that was early in my freelancing career as well, so I felt really panicky because I had made the unfortunate mistake of having just a few clients.”

Millard recovered from the bust and by the time the Great Recession hit in 2008, she was writing for a diverse clientele of editorial and corporate clients, covering a gamut of topics including health and identity theft, and she fared much better because she'd been there before. Looking back at her annual earnings since she started freelancing, Millard sees the spikes and dips average each other out.

“I think early on in my career I thought that if I don't really ramp up and make a lot of money, then I'm going to be out on the street or I'm going to be sitting in a cubicle somewhere,” Millard says. “Don't freak out about the rise and fall of your fortune. It'll be okay, it all evens out.”

Killelea is learning that lesson in the first year of his career. After finishing an editorial fellowship at *Outside* in March 2017, Killelea opted to stay in Santa Fe with his girlfriend and try freelancing instead of searching for a job, a decision he knew meant less stability. He makes just enough money to get by, and in exchange for having the time and flexibility to travel the American West to report longform stories on energy and public lands, the green freelancer is just fine with that.

“If everything goes according to plan, I'm just going to keep going at it and see what happens,” Killelea says. “Don't freak out, and have a savings account. Create your own cushion, because some people won't pay you for like six months.”

## **5: Pretend you're the editor**

The freelancers I interviewed agree that freelance writers who were once editors have a distinct advantage over those without editing experience as former editors can recall the components of a pitch they would have instantly green-lighted, and the shortcomings of a

pitch that would have gone straight to the trash. Editor or not, though, all freelancers can benefit from reverse-engineering their pitches from the perspective of the editor on the receiving end.

Martin Fritz Huber was an *Outside* editorial fellow in 2014; he's since moved to Brooklyn and writes about all things running. When researching a magazine story, he thinks back to the pitch meetings he'd attended as a fellow years ago. "Seeing the editors converse with one another and seeing how stories were either enthusiastically received, or they'd say 'No, why would anyone want to read that,' that was very eye-opening," Huber says. He realized in those meetings that getting a pitch accepted ultimately meant passing the scrutiny of the magazine's senior editors.

Abe Streep, a Santa Fe, New Mexico-based longform writer, was one such *Outside* senior editor who quit his job in 2014 to devote his full attention to writing. The pitches Streep would approve as a senior editor and the pitches Huber strives to formulate as a freelancer share a major characteristic: They're departures from what everyone else is writing about.

"Try as much as possible to cut out the noise and not run toward what is popular, or of the moment, but to focus on subject matter that you know and care about and actually have something to say about," Streep says. For Streep, that means exploring the outdoors to find places and people that aren't being written about but are being effected by larger political and economic forces. In his running commentary, Huber cuts out the noise by identifying the prevailing wisdom of the sport and challenging it.

Mirroring Streep's instruction, Huber works to write commentaries that cut through the noise in U.S. running culture. In a July 2017 *Outside* post, Huber wrote the

headline, “A Fast Mile Is More Impressive Than A Slow Marathon.” As most readers are marathoners and not milers, the story still solicits hundreds of angry Facebook comments from marathoners who are accustomed to being applauded for running far, just as Huber intensioned—he knows the self-righteous noise of the marathoning crowd and finds a way to strike a nerve.

Holland, who was an associate editor at Yukon-based publication *Up Here* before going full-time freelance, says the experience of editing helped her refine the aspects of a winning feature pitch. “It has to have an actual narrative arc and some heft to it. The ideal magazine feature is one that pairs an individual story with a larger issue,” Holland says. And to sell the individual story upon which the feature hinges, Holland is sure to nail down the details before sending the pitch. “Ideally, I don’t bring a pitch to an editor until I have the character or characters in mind and access to them lined up,” she says.

## **6: Protect ya’ neck**

The Wu-Tang Clan coined that phrase—referring to the self-preservation instincts required to survive the slums of 1980s Staten Island, New York—but you’ve got to be just as street smart when it comes to your intellectual property and personal liability. Every contract has three points of negotiation: the rate, the copyright, and indemnification (whether the publication will defend you in a lawsuit). As freelancers rarely get their way with all three, it’s crucial to establish a hierarchy of what’s important to you in a contract, based on your desired rate, your personal goals for the work (whether you plan to re-publish or anthologize the story) and your vulnerability to a lawsuit.

Washington D.C.-based freelancer and former *Washingtonian* managing editor Ellen Ryan advises writers to look for First North American Serial Rights, she says, which either cover online or print publication, but not both. “If they wanted First North American Serial Rights, they would have to pay for web, or of course change the contract,” she says.

Ryan acknowledges that First North American Serial Rights have become harder to get throughout her career, starting in 2001 with the Supreme Court case *New York Times Co. v. Tasini*, when the *Times* lost a copyright infringement lawsuit to a freelancer whose work was republished in the LexisNexis database.

“We won the battle and lost the war because contracts got really, really bad after that,” Ryan says. “A lot of publishers have negotiated for all rights or rolled back liability clauses. People have even given up on first rights because they’re worried about liability clauses.”

Unless a writer successfully negotiates, major publishers like Rodale retain all rights—meaning your work can be used in print, online, or in Rodale books—and even retain reporting notes for three years after a story’s publication (according to a November 2017 Rodale contract). But before you use your bargaining chip to negotiate from all rights to first rights, for instance, make sure you’re not overlooking a missing indemnification clause that could leave you vulnerable to a lawsuit.

Lewis ran into that problem while reporting a story on marijuana industry firms in California. She met with her editor and the publication’s attorney after she began receiving legal threats from a company she’d planned to include in an upcoming story.

The indemnification clause on the contract was murky, so she asked the editor and attorney about it directly.

“I said, we are not publishing this unless you guarantee in writing that I am indemnified,” Lewis says. “And they said, ‘You’re not 100 percent indemnified.’” So Lewis pulled the story, and walked away from months of reporting to avoid being sued, which would have been far more costly in the long run.

## **7: Define your ethics**

Freelancers will always interact with brands, whether it’s for a press trip, a sample product, or content creation. The rules of the exchange depend on whom you talk to, but defining and sticking to a clear code of ethics goes a long way to maintaining credibility as a journalist.

Nebraska-based freelancer Linsey Knerl was in the right place at the right time. The mother of six was blogging about personal finance and frugal family living when the Great Recession hit in 2008. “It was really strange because the way I’ve always lived was now fashionable,” Knerl says. She began attending conferences and pitching her financial tips to magazine editors, and the subsequent editorial exposure caught the attention of brands like Walmart; the company wanted her thrifty expertise for its Walmart World blog. Knerl accepted the offer to create Walmart’s content, and with it, a code of ethics that defines the line she walks today between editorial and sponsored content.

“I always have to ask, ‘Who’s paying for this?’” Knerl says. “And how do I make sure I’m disclosing everything and separating myself when I’m doing a magazine article from when I’m being approached by Walmart?” Editorial freedom is important to Knerl

as she wants to maintain the authority she has within her blogging platform, so she exclusively works with brands that allow her to publish what she otherwise would as a journalist. Conagra Brands, for instance, paid her and a couple other bloggers to cover its child hunger campaign and asked that Knerl write the post for her own blog “We had the creative freedom to cover it any way we wanted to,” Knerl says. “We didn’t have to seek approval; we could write that we thought it was great, or if we thought it wasn’t.” She doesn’t solicit branded assignments, though. “They always reach out to us,” she says.

The corporate work has helped Knerl become the breadwinner of her family, but other freelancers, like gun violence and criminal justice writer Mark Obbie of Canandaigua, New York, have shunned brand partnerships and sponsored content altogether. Obbie’s interest in hard news began when he was a reporter for the Warren, Ohio *Tribune-Chronicle* in 1982, and he’s covered courts and crime for newspapers and law journals throughout his career. A full-time freelancer since quitting his journalism teaching job at Syracuse University in 2012, Obbie’s personal constitution has no amendments for corporate work, no matter the fee.

“I haven’t done any corporate work,” Obbie says. “I’ve had opportunities to do corporate content, sponsored content, and other sorts of PR and whatnot. I just refuse to do anything that isn’t pure journalism. It’s not why I became a journalist.”

Each freelancer must define the clientele he or she is comfortable with, but Knerl and Obbie have avoided trouble in their own areas by staying true to their ethics of working with brands.

## **8: Diversify your clientele**

Just like diversifying an investment portfolio, diversifying your clientele as a freelancer can insulate your business from recessions and changes in the publishing landscape. The strategy can also free up some time to work on longer projects, and open you up to audiences on a variety of platforms.

Missouri-based freelancer Steve Weinberg is the author of nine books and countless magazine features, but he always had a way to generate fast cash to support his penchant for time-consuming investigative work: book reviews. “I got to a point where I could get assignments any time from most of my editors, reviewing for 20 different places at one time,” he says.

Weinberg hasn’t strayed from editorial work since he started freelancing full-time in 1978, but he’s maintained a broad clientele of national titles, city and regional magazines, trade publications, law and literary journals alike. He credits his longevity with maintaining a balance between sure-thing book reviews and Hail Mary cold feature pitches. “Book reviewing was on autopilot for a long time,” Weinberg says. “Everything else is hard-won, you don’t just snap your fingers and get major magazine assignments.”

Friedman learned the benefits of a diverse clientele when she was laid off from *GOOD Magazine* in 2012. She throttled up her exposure by writing on the “content hamster wheel” as she calls it, filing stories for *New York’s The Cut*, *Columbia Journalism Review*, *The Hairpin*, and one random publication each week. “I didn’t expect anyone to read me in all of those places, but if an editor runs across your name in one of those places two weeks in a row, it has a little more sticking power,” Friedman says.

Five years later, the plan has paid dividends. Friedman’s cutting analysis of pop culture and gender issues has earned her a respectable following (she has 70,100 Twitter

followers as of this writing), and she's cultivated her brand to expand into new platforms. Each week, Friedman publishes an email newsletter, records a podcast, provides editorial consulting and appears at public speaking engagements, all while reporting and writing national magazine stories. "You collapse the wall between business and editorial because you are a business, you're a one-person editorial business," Friedman says. "Writing remains the most fulfilling and probably the most financially important thing that I do, but frankly, it's one of like six irons in the fire."

### **9: Find out how you work best**

When your home is your office and your break room has Netflix and beer, you've got to have an honest conversation with yourself about how and when you're going to get down to business. Some freelancers can work in their bunny slippers; others need to get out of the house to get anything done. And when you have no "boss" but 12 editors demanding your time at once, striking a balance between workday productivity and knowing when to log off is imperative to making the lifestyle work for you.

Millard lives on a farm in northern Minnesota and momentarily paused during our phone interview to wrangle an errant pig. She writes health and wellness stories for national titles like *Men's Health*, *SELF*, and *Prevention* and works 25 hours a week; she used to work twice as much, but got burnt out after five years of collecting copious fees but feeling chained to her laptop. Millard has learned to optimize her working time by compartmentalizing her day with the Pomodoro Technique, in which she sets daily deadlines to stay on-task. "I'll say, 'I think this article should take an hour and a half to write,' and magically, I get it done in an hour and 29 minutes," Millard says.

We may not be our most creative selves while shackled to a desk, so Millard walks her dogs when she's devoid of pitch ideas. "I think of like three stories by the time I'm done," she says. "If you can physically move, it usually helps you to unstick your brain."

Ryan went freelance in 2012, and despite her decades of magazine experience, she feels the all-too-common anxiety over declining assignments. "I feel like if I leave, they'll find somebody else," Ryan says. "It's not just me, obviously. Everyone has the same fear." Like Millard, Ryan knows being on constant alert is an unsustainable way to live, so she sets boundaries to limit herself from instinctively replying to emails 24-7. "You can't be at their beck and call, you can't constantly have this pressure all the time," she says. Ironically, instilling a 9-to-5 sensibility about your work/life balance could be the key to staying sane.

### **10: Remember why you started freelancing in the first place**

Every freelancer I interviewed had different reasons for going independent—autonomy, adventure, being laid off and realizing she was better off—but two common threads emerged that underscore the career trajectories of these writers: the satisfaction derived from getting to write on topics of personal importance for a living, and the sometimes masochistic, sometimes euphoric endeavor of running one's own business.

Streep left *Outside* because he knew he wanted to write, and eventually, scratching the itch helped him overcome the fear. "My experience was that to be a really great editor, your energy has to be focused on the writer and the resulting story. And that doesn't bring a lot of ego with it," Streep says. "I had an awesome job, but at a certain

point, I had to pursue it.” Comfortable in his teaching job at Syracuse University, perhaps *too* comfortable, Obbie realized he was nearing the twilight of his career without totally committing himself to the meaningful crime reporting that got him into journalism decades ago. “I felt like I didn’t get to stretch my legs as a reporter and a writer as much as I assumed I would,” he says.

As far back as she can remember, Eva Holland was a model employee. She sliced bagels in a deli, waited tables, and shoveled snow to get her freelancing career off the ground. Over the years, she realized that the publishers to whom she had given her dogged reporting and carefully chosen words would never love her back, so she stopped considering the prospect of working for them. “For me, it’s almost better to be self-employed, because I was giving myself fully to some dumb job that was never going to reward me for it,” she says. “Now, if I want to be a total workaholic, I’m the only one who gets the benefits.”

Steele moved to New York City at age 22 with no job and no money because she says she’s always been paranoid by the idea of having her location, her schedule, and her life defined by a job. “As long as the highs continue to be as good as they are, I don’t think I’ll ever not be able to tolerate the lows because I know that this too shall pass,” she says. “I literally have to tell myself, ‘But Lauren, did you die?’ And that’s a crazy relationship to have with your profession, but that’s the thing: Freelancing is not a profession, freelancing is a lifestyle.”

## **Epilogue**

Being afforded the privilege of speaking with 12 successful freelancers—at length, too—about their livelihoods is equal parts humbling and invigorating. The only nugget of insight I can add to follow up these commandments is that strangely, I got the sense that I shared something in common with each of them (and not just the weed thing with Amanda Chicago Lewis). To note, this isn't something physical, as they're all plainly better than I at every part of this game. What surprised me is that they're all perfectly human, and no shot of adrenaline from nailing a story or cashing a check seems to last long enough to overshadow the anxiety, which becomes acceptance, over the fact that this is an inherently unstable life choice.

When I used to run competitively, it was only after the best races, the ones when I'd really turned myself inside out and passed out at the finish line, that I'd get this sinking feeling. It feels like fear, it is fear; fear from the discovery that in order to best that effort, you're going to have to inflict even more pain upon yourself, and the only way you got through the most recent ordeal was telling yourself it was the last time. We bargain with ourselves in times of suffering, we tell ourselves we'll take a break when we're done, that we'll find a healthier balance with our work, but we know we probably won't. I sensed that sentiment with my sources, especially from the feature writers in this story, and now that I'm in the throws of my first freelance feature I'm beginning to feel it again myself. Fear that I won't be able to deliver, that the opportunity cost of a big assignment will bankrupt me, that I won't be willing to write myself unconscious when the time comes.

Like it did with running, though, the adrenaline found in reckoning with that fear is what keeps me, and perhaps everyone else, coming back for more.