

# A Miniature Handbook for New Women Activists

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## STEP ONE: LEARN TO SPEAK.

At the dinner table, your mother and your grandmother tell you, *Be quiet, your brother's talking. Be quiet, your father's talking. Be quiet, your husband's talking.* The men glance at you, then carry on with what they're saying, vindication in their eyes. You're pretty sure they mean it when they say *I love you*. But sometimes you wonder if they know exactly what love means.\*

\* The "you" is meant to be collective; some of these experiences are mine, some related or shared by other women.

*From Fracture: Essays, Poems, and Stories on  
Fracking in America (Lee<sup>38</sup> Cube Press, 2016).*

Late at night in bed your husband weeps as he tells you how his father unbuckled his belt with that terrible look in his eye: *I'm gonna teach you, boy, not to talk back.*

Men so seldom say *love* to one another. They say, *Behave. Turn it down. Keep yourself quiet.* All in the name of *being safe*. And so your husband learned not to speak. He learned to keep the rest of his family from speaking, too, in any situation in which they weren't absolutely certain of their listener. He learned the story he—and perhaps all of you—still believe despite the evidence accelerating every day, with every citizen-voted ordinance ignored and every well-poisoned and every seed-company executive appointed to the FDA: *Father knows best.*

*Father knows best. Authorities can always be trusted to protect us.* He learned that story early on, and in spite of everything he believes it. So, in spite of everything you know by now, do you. And fighting fracking or war or immigration raids or any other cause from your own communities on out still, if you are honest, so often means that first you fight that story in your own head. *Father knows best. He says be quiet.* First you fight the trap that story lays before you, a small shiny cage in which you are tempted to huddle, and hide, as the related stories wash over you: That bruise-blood filling the soft skin under your eye is a sign of your man's protective passion for you, too deep to restrain itself, spilling the boundaries of reason and flesh. The politician's noble televised profile matches an inner nobility you can surely trust, since you voted for him, and he would never disregard the wishes of those who put him in office. The fox guards the hen-house because he loves those plump sleeping ladies. Cherishes them, in fact. As dearly as a father. And to suggest otherwise is to be a bad, bad girl.

That fox still lives so deep in your own brain you may never dig him out, despite your most diligent efforts. He licks his lips slowly, savoring the feast to come, opening his mouth only to caution you in a silvery, scornful growl: *Be quiet, girl. Nobody wants to listen to you.*

STEP TWO: LEARN MORE.

Julia Crawford's voice shakes as she describes TransCanada's seizure of her farm near Paris, Texas. They've run lengths of gray-blue pipeline under her stream, under the grass where her puzzled horses stand watching. Off-duty welders sleep in their trucks. Armed guards keep everyone—including her—at a distance. Out-of-state license plates proliferate, belying company promises of local jobs. "I thought at first the worst was when they cut my fence," she says. "Then the worst was when they started digging, and the grass came up." Then she saw the pipeline itself, 36 inches in diameter, lying in wait to be buried, marked with her own name. The company promised her that in eighteen months, she wouldn't even know they'd been there. "I don't want to overuse this analogy," she says, "but would you ever say that to someone who had been...violated? 'Oh, in eighteen months, you'll forget all about it? Just go on about your life, go to your job, and everything will be normal?'"

Sandra Steingraber speaks up next. She's just spent six days in jail for blocking trucks that would dump fracking wastewater into an old salt mine, polluting a lake that supplies drinking water for ten thousand people. She's a biologist. She's a parent. She's a cancer survivor. She connects the dots: What uncontrolled corporate greed dumps into our air and water, with our government's collusion and consent, ends up in our bodies. We pay for it, even as we buy into the notion that our consumer-driven, energy-dependent way of life

must continue on exactly as it is. "I thought it was important," she says, "not just to pay the fine and get off. The companies pay fines. I wanted to put my body on the line. These companies do not pay for their crimes."

Frozen on your couch, you can't stop listening to their voices on the radio. Out the window lies your own small yard in the early-June dusk, blooming with irises and wild columbine and young bean and tomato plants and a freshly planted grapevine, alive with finches and sparrows and red-winged blackbirds with their distinctive two-note song. You know how you would feel if bulldozers rampaged onto your land though you had done everything possible to forbid them, if they tore up the ground you had cared for and worked with your own hands. You know how you would feel if your ownership of your life and your land and your property were flatly denied, violated, as if what you wanted simply did not matter to anyone except yourself. Shoved down. Ripped open. Used. And then your attacker drives away, wiping his hands on his jeans.

"I'm trying to be reasonable," Julia Crawford says. "I'm trying to color inside the lines. But maybe the time is coming when I just won't be able to do that anymore."

You go to an anti-frac-sand mining conference in western Wisconsin, the hardest-hit of all the areas threatened by the frac-sand industry in your beautiful, wild corner of the upper Midwest. The opening prayer is offered by a member of the Ho-Chunk Nation. A retired geology professor teaches you that the suffix *-fer* means *bearer*, so *aquifer* means *bearer of water*. ("Once contaminated," he says, "an aquifer is poisoned for good.") A retired army colonel says, "I dread spring, now, because I can't open my windows without dust everywhere. We've all got a cough." Lawyers speak with a

matter-of-factness that feels exciting yet terrifying: "We specialize in helping those arrested in direct-action, civil-disobedience protests. Here's our number."

**STEP THREE: GET ANGRY.**

Could you put your body on the line, like Sandra Steingraber?

Aren't you doing so already?

Ten years ago now, when you were in your late twenties, you read about a girl your age who'd discovered a cocktail of industrial chemicals in her breast milk, from PCBs to industrial flame retardants. This was a world of hurt that had literally never occurred to you. Like any woman, you knew about the dangers of just walking around in your body, and since adolescence you'd picked up traces of that different poison—self-consciousness walking down the street, the impulse to sit on your hands in class, the burning, helpless rage when bullying boys sniggered *cunt* into your ear on the school bus. And now, here was a new poison passed from your body into your baby's, without either of you knowing, or consenting, or having the power to stop it. You'll never forget your incredulity on reading that. Or the bone-deep recognition of a danger running like a dark familiar current under the ways of life you've always thought were *normal*.

You recognize that poison because we've all been living with it for a long, long time. A woman who's done nothing wrong gets her body taken from her, co-opted, polluted, in this way and many others. Sold liposuction and hair straightener and Botox to make her a little prettier, a little smoother, to help her take up just a little less space. Thrown in the trunk of a car by an online-dating "match." Slashed, raped, killed. Buried alive in cellars from Austria to Ohio, impregnated by strange men or fathers. Told in abstinence-only classes that

her body, no longer virginal, will become like a lollipop sucked on, used up, thrown away, no longer wanted by anyone—a Mormon girl abducted, raped, and held by a crazed "prophet" will confirm, years after her escape, that rhetoric like that helped bind her to her captor, her head down in shame. But kidnapping gets people's attention: to advertise their product, a Texas company makes a decal that covers a truck tailgate with a picture of a bound, gagged woman huddled against a black bedliner. The company owner claims he was surprised by the angry reactions he got and was only trying to "see who noticed it." Over and over, a woman who's done nothing wrong suffers anyway. Her body is the holding pool for the runoff of centuries' worth of neuroses, rages, and toxins, figurative and literal.

Finally, she says it. Again and again, first softer, then louder. *Open the door. Let me out. She gets louder and louder and bursts into the street. Finally she shouts. Let me out. You don't have the right. This is simply not fair.*

**STEP FOUR: KNOW YOUR HISTORY.**

Last year, you stood beside your parents at the well on the family farm in rural Alabama. When you were a child, this place was Eden. All around this well were collards and tomatoes and gourds in a lush garden, a giant fig tree, and an orchard with peaches and plums and a scuppernon arbor that overflowed your scarred plastic buckets and baskets with fruit. Hearing, as a little girl in your Methodist Sunday School, about the hopes of those wandering desert Israelites for a lasting and bountiful home—and the Bible's many analogies of water, richness, gardens, trees, and fountains for the spiritual repleteness offered by the Jesus you pictured as vividly as a known person in your mind—it made perfect sense that they would dream of living water

as a metaphor for God, that God would speak to those who sought Him in terms of water, of thirst quenched and satisfied, of life that renews itself by mystery and grace as surely as our abused earth has struggled back to give, and give, and give again. You ran through the grass under those trees, batting away yellow jackets too full and happy to sting, tracking between your sister and your baby brother and your grandparents and your parents, soaking in the light flickering on your face through the leaves and the laden branches, convinced that this world as you knew it would never die.

The orchard and the fig tree and the garden are gone now. So is the silver-burnished tin dipper from which you drank that well water on every single trip to the orchard. Your mother lifts the well cover and your father drops a stone inside. From twenty feet away you hear the thunk—not a splash—where it hits. "Dry," your father says. You turn away. That lost orchard paints itself across your mind so vividly it threatens to eclipse the actual sight of the few remaining pecan trees in that spot.

The stream that ran across the back of that farm for years and years is also dry. Upstream is a new gravel quarry that has disrupted the flow of water to your farm and your neighbors. Drought brought on by climate change is not a myth. It is not something happening somewhere else. It is here. And it is yours.

Because of this, when the threat of frac-sand mining and its land-poisoning and water-poisoning comes to your new home in the Midwest, and when fracking enters the boom stage of its inevitable boom-and-bust cycle all over the country, you can't look away. You can't be cowed by the oil-and-gas industry, which promises *domestic energy independence* even as they sell Pennsylvania gas to China and Wisconsin-mined frac sand to Saudi Arabia, even as they obscure

the vanishingly low rate of return on pipelined and fracked fuels and the massive amount of other fuel and water it takes to extract them. (Forty years ago, their PR firms were the ones hired by Big Tobacco to croon *smoking is good for you!*) Even if your elected officials won't, you know the people have to say, '*Energy independence cannot mean the freedom to carry on exactly as we always have.* You cannot face the imagined children of the future, peering at you over the corpses of logged-out hills and sizzled-up grasslands, pleading, *You knew and you did nothing, why?*'

Unbidden, when you need it, comes the image of your mother, taking care. You see her lifting an old lady from her bed in a county nursing home smelling of piss and boredom and rubbing her back to keep the flesh from mortifying and the sores from setting in. You see her hands over yours—you are six then, maybe seven—on a chain looped around a calf's feet sticking out of a blur of blood and fascia; in the headcatch, the cow bellows, and your mother calls, "I know, honey, we're going to get him out of there." She delights in the swallows that nest on her porch every spring and calls to tell you about the three baby killdeer, light as dandelion fluff, that skitter after their parents over the yard. When one of those little chicks dies, she holds it for your small niece to study in matter-of-fact reverence: "Feel how light he is, how small. But look, how wonderful!"

The love of our world just is, in you. So is the wonder, everlasting. You can't not write of it, you can't not love and therefore work for the protection of these creatures and this land. Of all your responsibility and guilt and forecasting and worry and excitement and hope you just know: there's no other way but to do this.

**STEP FIVE: USE THE SYSTEM.**

Your small town's Planning and Zoning Commission meets to debate a proposed moratorium on frac-sand mining in your county. More than two hundred people fill the courtroom and spill out into the hall. All the public comments but two—both from mining-company representatives—support the moratorium, for which you and your community activist group have been working since the previous fall. Yet several of the Planning and Zoning Commission members—particularly a couple of men in baseball caps—look doubtful, despite the documents in front of them. We're very close to a vote, which will ride on the ten minutes left in the meeting. "Here's a brief list of facts, pro and con," says one commission member, Wendy, smoothly handing everyone a sheet. "It might help." The men browse down the sheet and nod. The moratorium passes with only one dissenting vote and passes the county Board of Supervisors unanimously two weeks later.

You aren't surprised it's Wendy who did it. In her sixties, with a light step and a quick smile, she's a colleague of yours at the local college, where you've just helped celebrate her retirement from the biology department after forty-two years. She's famous for a pet boa constrictor named Sweetie (worn on her shoulders during the occasional lecture), her popularity with students, and her heroic efforts on behalf of advisees. Her first office was a janitor's closet. All her colleagues were men. She's been a mentor to you, and a role model. And she shows you again, that night, that the rules are made by people who show up and work with what is here.

**STEP SIX: DON'T BE NAÏVE.**

Except when the rules are made by corporations. You are coming to believe that corporate money in politics and lawmaking may be the

single greatest threat not just to lives in a democracy but to democracy itself. Corporations are powerful not just because they've bought politicians and ordinance-writers and permit-approvers but because they've bought us, too, inserting themselves into us as insidiously and completely as Big Brother inhabits Winston Smith by the end of George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. They create our desires and identities and sell them back to us: the appleini-sipping single woman, the stoic farmer for whom resisting Monsanto is un-American, the hip slingers of commercial catch-phrases that supplant our own words. They make questioning the will of any industry that wants something from us seem even more "un-American" than questioning the government itself.

But know a few things. You're not alone. You're not crazy. Honestly acknowledging any emotion—and the prisms of stress and prejudice and personal anxieties that bend it into and out of you—helps you deal with it. Particularly if you're female, being condemned as *liberal* or *radical* for objecting to losing your air, water, and rights to your own property and body really means being condemned for speaking up at all. It really means being condemned for arousing the Victorian lizard-brain twitch that objects to women anywhere but in the house, the shopping mall, or the car on the way to the shopping mall, smiling beatifically and answering, when asked, *Oh, I just vote with my husband on all those sorts of things*. As Rebecca Solnit writes, "Most women fight wars on two fronts, one for whatever the putative topic is and one simply for the right to speak, to have ideas, to be acknowledged to be in possession of facts and truths, to have value, to be a human being." You are in these two wars. Both are real. Read Terry Tempest Williams's beautiful book *When Women Were Birds* and be haunted by its opening image: shelves of her mother's journals, every

page blank. Let yourself fill with grief for all the women who never did speak, and all the others who died without ever knowing what hit them.

You're a new woman activist. "New" is a relative term.

Remember that you are still alive. You still have a voice. Use it to speak what you know. And you do know this: it's the good woman, in the most difficult and necessary sense of the word, who forces conversations, who says, *Honey, the drinking has to stop. We are spending too much money. If this behavior does not change I will leave because I cannot raise our children here.*

Anti-fracking and anti-frac-sand-mining activism—to take just one, related set of examples—is forcing a conversation we need. If you do not stand up, no one will. If you do not force the conversation, no one will. *Our credit cards beyond maxed out. The party's over. We've got to wake up.*

#### STEP SEVEN: KEEP TALKING.

Wake up, honey. We can't afford to live like this anymore.