

JESS ROW

# THE SEVEN HABITS OF HIGHLY EFFECTIVE PEOPLE

1.

**THE THING IS**, Walker said, you can't actually *burn down a golf course*. A golf course is a landscape. "Burn down" is a figure of speech. He—Walker and Rachel and Dave Shapiro and the Deadhead who called himself Skippy, though he was identified in court as Mark Bradshaw of Takoma Park—poured a perimeter line of vodka in the dry grass and used bits of torn-up Bethesda–Chevy Chase graduation programs as tinder. At the time Walker described it as a "controlled burn." It was between two and three in the morning, according to the police, and the fire raced across the grass faster than he had predicted, a livid seam across the seventh hole, where the sprinklers were broken. There was a line of rhododendron bushes, just past flowering, and they went up like torches. He hadn't predicted that but it was beautiful. "It turns out," he told you, "a burning rhododendron is even more beautiful than a flowering rhododendron."

2.

**"I'VE DECIDED** I'm only going to date rich men," Carrie said. You were drinking well gin and tonics after work at St. Mark's Lounge, and you could see her point. "Let me amend that," she said. "Certain men who *happen* to be rich, because given their personalities, they couldn't be anything else. Self-evidently rich men. That's who I'm talking about."

Carrie was a summer intern at Farrar, Straus, and Giroux. She insisted on saying it that way, because that was how she had been told to answer the phone. It was 1996. People didn't yet go to work ironically. Anyway she was from Nebraska; her parents were high school French teachers. "Look," she said. "You're going to be a writer. Greg's going to be a lawyer. Aparna's going to be a reconstructive surgeon. I have to *self-fashion*. I keep a notebook," she said, "and if I don't understand a word I hear in the office, I write it down and look it up later."

Then she laughed and said, "You're not allowed to judge me for saying this. It's not that I would sleep with anyone on Earth to get into publishing. But it's also that I would sleep with *someone* on Earth to get into

publishing. People have to understand the difference. It's like they say," she said, "at work, you can choose to be disposable or indispensable."

"Who said that?"

"It was on a poster," she said, with a faraway look, "in the break room, at my first job. At Jiffy Lube. Thanks so much for asking."

### 3.

**AT SYLVIE'S** wedding, in a barn in Great Barrington, Kevin, who you hadn't seen since sophomore year, wanted you to know how far his company had come from its roots in the adult film industry. He wrote software that embedded videos in web pages. A year later he appeared on the cover of *Fast Company* with a much better haircut.

"Don't you sometimes just think, *we were too late?*" he asked you. "We wanted to get in on the ground floor, but the ground floor was full. People five years older than us bought all the brownstones and the good URLs." He popped an oyster into his mouth and waved at the rabbi. "You have to spend money to make money," he said. "Here's a tip: print the fanciest business cards you can afford. Cultivate an air of mystery. You want to be the face at the party everyone recognizes but no one can name. You want to be a conduit. You want to be a hub. You want to be an enabler. You have to sell yourself, but without trying too hard. You want to look aspirational but also like you come from money. Like this place," he said, gesturing at the barn's exposed beams, the foot-high candles dripping wax on the expensively burnished floors. "It's like, this is an incredibly beautiful barn, but also, fuck this barn. You see what I mean?"

Later, when you were leaving, he waved you over and whispered in your ear. "Always remember," he said, "when the millenium was actually happening, *no one had heard the word 'millennial.'*"

### 4.

**AFTER THE** recession, when Sotheby's fired all of its assistants, Sylvie got a degree at Hunter and started teaching high school in the Bronx. On her way home from work, on the Grand Concourse, a fifth-grader snatched her phone. Josh, her husband, an assistant district attorney, told the story every night during his long-shot bid for a City Council seat representing their neighborhood in Cobble Hill; later he hired himself out as a political consultant for tough-on-crime Democrats. A year later he left her for Susan Pelosi's chief of staff.

“And the funny thing is,” Sylvie told you, years later, “the battery on that phone was shot and I was about to upgrade it anyway. I couldn’t stop myself. I yelled after the kid, ‘I would have given it to you if you had asked nicely.’”

5.

**“I WAS WORKING** at *Time* on 9/11,” Jessica told you, standing over the picnic table with her third glass of Vinho Verde. “I was the secondmost junior reporter, I’d just been hired the year before, and they assigned me the article on pets. Maybe you saw it. The pets left behind. Cats dying of dehydration. Puppies rescued out of fire escapes. For a couple of years I was the 9/11 Pets Girl. Then they went through a huge round of cuts and everyone who knew me got fired. I was safe because I was cheap and would write anything. I was making \$28,000 and living in a studio on East 93rd and York, but I could call one of their town cars whenever I needed a ride to the office. Imagine that today. Imagine being a journalist and getting a free Uber.”

She shielded her eyes to make sure her daughter wouldn’t actually catch the dog she was chasing around the swing set.

“Then one day, I was pulling together my clips, years later, and I realized that pets piece was still my best work. That was the sum total of what my imagination could come up with, my *unique cultural insight*. So I went over to new media and bought a bike. I’m really good at sponsored content. I can do wonders with stock photos and a pretty font.”

She finished her wine and looked around for a place to put the cup.

“I have no idea if this is recyclable or compostable,” she said. “Look at us, we’ve lived through so many waste management trends. Now I’m too tired even to dig a hole so I can shoot myself and fall in it. But I do have a theory about how Heath Ledger died that I can’t tell anyone.”

6.

**“LISTEN,”** Jans said to you, when Kaitlin went into the coffee shop to use the bathroom. “You have to have something go viral. Not in a random unfocused way, like the mom whose kid said something funny getting off the bus. You have to have a piece go viral, a thought, a concept, a feeling. That way you can be a *thought leader*.” He tossed back the last of his espresso and leaned over his handlebars. Sweat pooled in his cleft chin. It was eight thirty, and they’d already ridden twenty-three miles. He spoke with the confidence of someone who’d grown up in a European welfare

state, who had never in his life seen an Explanation of Benefits. “You have to prepare yourself without seeming prepared,” he said. “You have to burst out into the world saying things that are daring and new but still confirm people’s prejudices. It’s not just that you have to go viral, you have to become the virus. It was all in a TED talk, I’ll send it to you.”

## 6.5.

**THE APARTMENT** you sublet in Gramercy that summer belonged to two writers, a gay couple in their fifties who were close friends of Susan Sontag. A signed poster of her hung just inside the front door, as if that was all you needed to know. It was a one-bedroom, and Greg and Aparna were a couple, so Carrie had to sleep on the couch, and you slept on an air mattress behind the couch. You also contributed the least rent, which was fair, because yours was a nonpaying internship.

One of those weekend mornings you woke up early and tiptoed to the kitchen. The hallway, like every room, was lined with floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, and the shelf nearest the door and the Sontag poster, held all of their own books, these two writers. You hadn’t heard of any of them. You didn’t recognize their names. The most recent book, as far as you could tell, was a novel from the late eighties, a Vintage paperback.

Susan Sontag stared at you, her hair going up in a single white flame. “You have nothing going for you,” she said. “You’re too late.”

“I don’t know what that means,” you said.

“Look at you, staring at Christopher and Mel’s books with that desperate envious expression. What do you know about growing up closeted in the 1940s in small-town Indiana? What have *you* got in your soul that needs to be validated?”

“I don’t know,” you said. “Maybe nothing.”

“That was a rhetorical question,” she said, rolling her eyes. “Here’s some free advice. Everyone was an imposter once, and then they stole something. Whatever you do, don’t write about your childhood. No one cares about your memories of Donkey Kong at Pizza Hut. Lean into your degradation, your dread of failure. Describe yourself as a plate of quivering aspic.”

“I don’t even know what aspic looks like.”

She was really building up to something; her head was beginning to smoke. “You coddled kids,” she said, “you don’t even realize those bands you like are all singing the same song: *Everything is going to be fine*. Try telling that to the kids in Sarajevo.”

“You’re not Susan Sontag,” you said. “You’re my unconscious speaking. Fuck you, Susan Sontag.”

“In the future,” she said, “right here, on this block, people will pay a lot of money to ride bicycles in a big room while someone yells at them. That will be considered a fine art. No one will acknowledge the difference between poetry and advertising. All the movies will be about shiny objects you can buy. People will pay hundreds of dollars for your *Fuck You, Susan Sontag* T-shirts. It’s going to be awesome. You are going to be absolutely fine. You have nothing to worry about.”

7.

**IN YOUR BACKYARD**, growing up, there was a stone gnome, an actual garden gnome. Your parents put it there when they first moved in, before you were born. It was an inside joke they never explained. You could see it from your bedroom window. In middle school you stole a can of spray paint from the TrueValue and painted it red. Dad said it was an improvement. By that time his company had been sold and his new CEO was kind of a dick and they had to go on a lot of team-building retreats, and every time he got home, as a joke, he left a new motivational book on your desk. Come on, Dad said every morning in high school, when he knocked on your door at 6:45, it’s time to awaken the giant within.

But that’s not the point of this story. The point is, right now, anytime you want, you can look out of your childhood window and see the gnome watching you. The gnome doesn’t change. Its field of vision does not change. It knows everything you’ll ever need to know, but it won’t tell you. There are fires smoldering all around you, but you can’t smell them yet.

**NOTE:**

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