

Classic Poetry Series

Judith Viorst
- poems -

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Judith Viorst(February 2, 1931)

an American author, newspaper journalist, and psychoanalysis researcher. She is perhaps best known for her children's literature, such as *The Tenth Good Thing About Barney* (about the death of a pet) and the Alexander series of short picture books.

Viorst is a 1952 graduate of the Newark College of Arts and Sciences at Rutgers University in Newark, New Jersey. In 1968, Viorst signed the "Writers and Editors War Tax Protest" pledge, vowing to refuse tax payments in protest against the Vietnam War. In the latter part of the 1970s, after two decades of writing for children and adults, she turned to the study of Freudian psychology. In 1981, and after six years of study at Washington Psychoanalytic Institute, she became a research graduate there.

Personal Life

Viorst lives in Washington, DC, with her husband, political writer Milton Viorst. They have three grown sons: Anthony Jacob Viorst, an attorney practicing in the Denver, Colorado area; Nicholas Nathan "Nick" Viorst, an Assistant District Attorney for New York County, and Alexander Noah Viorst.

She received the Foremother Award for lifetime achievements from the National Research Center for Women & Families in 2011.

Writing

Writing for Children

Among Viorst's books for children is the "Alexander" series (including *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*), whose narrator is a 5-year-old boy who lives with his parents and two brothers, Anthony and Nick named for Viorst's own three sons.

Viorst's book *'Sad Underwear'* is a collection of poems that examines a wide variety of feelings and experiences from a child's point of view.

Writing for Adults

Viorst's books for adults include nonfiction psychology books such as *"Grown-up Marriage"*, *Imperfect Control*, *Necessary Losses*, and *People* and other

Aggravations. Viorst is also a newspaper columnist and has written frequently for The New York Times and The Washington Post, and has been a contributing editor to Redbook magazine.

She also penned the musical Love & Shrimp with Shelly Markam. The Ensemble Theater of Cincinnati hosted a performance of Love & Shrimp, starring Deb Girdler, Pamela Myers and Shelley Bamberger, in the spring of 1999.

Anti-Heroine

I'd planned to be Heathcliff's Cathy,
Lady Brett, Nicole or Dominique or Scarlett O'Hara.
I hadn't planned to be folding up the laundry
In uncombed hair and last night's smudged mascara,
An expert on buying Fritos, cleaning the cat box,
Finding lost sneakers, playing hide and seek.
And other things unknown to Heathcliff's
Cathy, Scarlett, Lady Brett, and Dominique.
Why am I never running through the heather?
Why am I never used by Howard Roark?
Why am I never going to Pamplona
Instead of Philadelphia and Newark?
How did I ever wind up with an Irving
When what I'd always had in mind was Rhett,
Or someone more appropriate to
Cathy, Dominique, Nicole, or Lady Brett?
I saw myself as heedless, heartless, headstrong,
An untamed woman searching for her mate.
And there he is -- with charcoal, fork, and apron,
Prepared to broil some hot dogs on the grate.
I haven't wrecked his life or his digestion
With unrequited love or jealous wrath.
He Doesn't know that secretly
I'm Scarlett, Dominique, Nicole, or Brett, or Cathy.
Why am I never cracking up in Zurich?
Why am I never languishing on moors?
Why am I never spoiled by faithful servants
Instead of spraying ant spray on the floors?
The tricycles are cluttering my foyer,
The Pop Tart crumbs are sprinkled on my soul.
And every year it's harder to be
Cathy, Dominique, Brett, Scarlett, and Nicole.

Judith Viorst

Fifteen, Maybe Sixteen Things To Worry About

My pants could maybe fall down when I dive off the diving board.
My nose could maybe keep growing and never quit.
Miss Brearly could ask me to spell words like stomach and special.
(Stumick and speshul?)
I could play tag all day and always be "it";
Jay Spievack, who's fourteen feet tall, could want to fight me.
My mom and my dad--like Ted's--could want a divorce.
Miss Brearly could ask me a question about Afghanistan.
(Who's Afghanistan?)
Somebody maybe could make me ride a horse.
My mother could maybe decide that I needed more liver.
My dad could decide that I needed less TV.
Miss Brearly could say that I have to write script and stop printing.
(I'm better at printing.)
Chris could decide to stop being friends with me.

The world could maybe come to an end on next Tuesday.
The ceiling could maybe come crashing on my head.
I maybe could run out of things for me to worry about.
And then I'd have to do my homework instead.

Judith Viorst

Happiness (Reconsidered)

Happiness

Is a clean bill of health from the doctor,
And the kids shouldn't move back home for
more than a year,
And not being audited, overdrawn, in Wilkes-Barre,
in a lawsuit or in traction.

Happiness

Is falling asleep without Valium,
And having two breasts to put in my brassiere,
And not (yet) needing to get my blood pressure lowered,
my eyelids raised or a second opinion.

And on Saturday nights

When my husband and I have rented
Something with Fred Astaire for the VCR,
And we're sitting around in our robes discussing,
The state of the world, back exercises, our Keoghs,
And whether to fix the transmission or buy a new car,
And we're eating a pint of rum-raisin ice cream
on the grounds that
Tomorrow we're starting a diet of fish, fruit and grain,
And my dad's in Miami dating a very nice widow,
And no one we love is in serious trouble or pain,
And our bringing-up-baby days are far behind us,
But our senior-citizen days have not begun,
It's not what I called happiness
When I was twenty-one,
But it's turning out to be
What happiness is.

Judith Viorst

If I Were In Charge Of The World

If I were in charge of the world
I'd cancel oatmeal,
Monday mornings,
Allergy shots, and also Sara Steinberg.

If I were in charge of the world
There'd be brighter nights lights,
Healthier hamsters, and
Basketball baskets forty eight inches lower.

If I were in charge of the world
You wouldn't have lonely.
You wouldn't have clean.
You wouldn't have bedtimes.
Or "Don't punch your sister."
You wouldn't even have sisters.

If I were in charge of the world
A chocolate sundae with whipped cream and nuts would be a vegetable
All 007 movies would be G,
And a person who sometimes forgot to brush,
And sometimes forgot to flush,
Would still be allowed to be
In charge of the world.

Judith Viorst

Learning

I'm learning to say thank you.
And I'm learning to say please.
And I'm learning to use Kleenex,
Not my sweater, when I sneeze.
And I'm learning not to dribble.
And I'm learning not to slurp.
And I'm learning (though it sometimes really hurts me)
Not to burp.
And I'm learning to chew softer
When I eat corn on the cob.
And I'm learning that it's much
Much easier to be a slob.

Judith Viorst

Mother Doesn'T Want A Dog

Mother doesn't want a dog.
Mother says they smell,
And never sit when you say sit,
Or even when you yell.
And when you come home late at night
And there is ice and snow,
You have to go back out because
The dumb dog has to go.

Mother doesn't want a dog.
Mother says they shed,
And always let the strangers in
And bark at friends instead,
And do disgraceful things on rugs,
And track mud on the floor,
And flop upon your bed at night
And snore their doggy snore.

Mother doesn't want a dog.
She's making a mistake.
Because, more than a dog, I think
She will not want this snake.

Judith Viorst

Remembrance Of Christmas Past

They let the children out of school too early.
I left the Christmas shopping till too late.
Each day we had a holiday excursion,
Which gave us the entire week to wait in line for
Movies by Disney,
Gift-wrapping by Lord & Taylor,
And everyone's restrooms.

On Christmas Eve we started to assemble
The easy-to-assemble telescope
And fire truck with forty-seven pieces.
By midnight it was plain there was no hope without
An astronomer,
A mechanical engineer,
And two psychiatrists.

We rose at dawn to three boys singing Rudolph.
We listened numbly to their shouts of glee.
The kitten threw up tinsel on the carpet.
The fire truck collided with the tree, requiring

One rug shampoo,
Several Band-aids,
And Scotch before breakfast.

I bought my husband shirts - wrong size, wrong colors,
And ties he said he couldn't be caught dead in.
I'd hinted Saint Laurent or something furry.
He bought me flannel gowns to go to bed in, also
A Teflon frying pan,
A plaid valise,
And The Weight Watchers Cook Book.

The turkey was still frozen at eleven.
At noon my eldest boy spilled Elmer's glue.
At five I had a swell Excedrin headache,
The kind that lasts till January two...but
Merry Christmas
And Happy New Year,

I think.

Judith Viorst

Since Hanna Moved Away

The tires on my bike are flat.
The sky is grouchy gray.
At least it sure feels like that
Since Hanna moved away.

Chocolate ice cream tastes like prunes.
December's come to stay.
They've taken back the Mays and Junes
Since Hanna moved away.

Flowers smell like halibut.
Velvet feels like hay.
Every handsome dog's a mutt
Since Hanna moved away.

Nothing's fun to laugh about.
Nothing's fun to play.
They call me, but I won't come out
Since Hanna moved away.

Judith Viorst

Some Advice From A Mother To Her Married Son

The answer to do you love me isn't, I married you, didn't I?

Or, Can't we discuss this after the ballgame is through?

It isn't, Well that all depends on what you mean by 'love'.

Or even, Come to bed and I'll prove that I do.

The answer isn't, How can I talk about love when
the bacon is burned and the house is an absolute mess and
the children are screaming their heads off and

I'm going to miss my bus?

The answer is yes.

The answer is yes.

The answer is yes.

Judith Viorst

Some Things Don'T Make Any Sense At All

My mom says I'm her sugarplum.

My mom says I'm her lamb.

My mom says I'm completely perfect

Just the way I am.

My mom says I'm a super-special wonderful terrific little guy.

My mom just had another baby.

Why?

Judith Viorst

The Honeymoon Is Over

The honeymoon is over
And he has left for work
Whistling something obvious from La Boheme
And carrying a brown calfskin attache case
I never dreamed he was capable of owning,
Having started the day
With ten pushups and a cold shower
Followed by hearty breakfast.

(What do we actually have in common?)

The honeymoon is over
And I am dry-mopping the floor
In a green Dacron dry-mopping outfit from Saks,
Wondering why I'm not dancing in the dark,
Or rejecting princes,
Or hearing people gasp at my one-man show,
My god, so beautiful and so gifted!

(The trouble is I never knew a prince.)

The honeymoon is over
And we find that dining by candlelight makes us squint,
And that all the time
I was letting him borrow my comb and hang up his wet
raincoat in my closet
I was really waiting
To stop letting him.
And that all the time
He was saying how he loved my chicken pot pie,
He was really waiting
To stop eating it.

(I guess they call this getting to know each other.)

Judith Viorst

The Pleasures Of Ordinary Life

I've had my share of necessary losses,
Of dreams I know no longer can come true.
I'm done now with the whys and the becauses.
It's time to make things good, not just make do.
It's time to stop complaining and pursue
The pleasures of an ordinary life.

I used to rail against my compromises.
I yearned for the wild music, the swift race.
But happiness arrived in new disguises:
Sun lighting a child's hair. A friend's embrace.
Slow dancing in a safe and quiet place.
The pleasures of an ordinary life.

I'll have no trumpets, triumphs, trails of glory.
It seems the woman I've turned out to be
Is not the heroine of some grand story.
But I have learned to find the poetry
In what my hands can touch, my eyes can see.
The pleasures of an ordinary life.

Young fantasies of magic and of mystery
Are over. But they really can't compete
With all we've built together: A long history.
Connections that help render us complete.
Ties that hold and heal us. And the sweet,
Sweet pleasures of an ordinary life.

Judith Viorst

Three (O'Clock) In The Morning

At three in the morning I used to be sleeping an untroubled
sleep in my bed.

But lately at three in the morning I'm tossing and turning,
Awakened by hypochondria, and gas, and nameless dread,
Whose name I've been learning. (worry)

At three in the morning I brood about what my cholesterol
count might reveal,
And the pains in my chest start progressing from gentle to racking,
While certain intestinal problems make clear that the onions
I ate with my meal
Plan on counter attacking.

At three in the morning I look toward the future with blankets
pulled over my ears,
And all of my basic equipment is distinctly diminished.
My gums are receding, my blood pressure's high, and I can't
begin listing my fears
Or I'll never get finished.
At three in the morning I used to be sleeping but lately I wake
and reflect

That my girlhood has gone and I'll now have to manage without it.
They tell me that I'm heading into my prime. From the previews
I do not expect
To be crazy about it.

Judith Viorst

True Love

It is true love because

I put on eyeliner and a concerto and make pungent observations about the great issues of the day

Even when there's no one here but him,

And because

I do not resent watching the Green Bay Packer

Even though I am philosophically opposed to football,

And because

When he is late for dinner and I know he must be either having an affair or lying dead in the middle of the street,

I always hope he's dead.

It's true love because

If he said quit drinking martinis but I kept drinking them and the next morning I couldn't get out of bed,

He wouldn't tell me he told me,

And because

He is willing to wear unironed undershorts

Out of respect for the fact that I am philosophically opposed to ironing,

And because

If his mother was drowning and I was drowning and he had to choose one of us to save,

He says he'd save me.

It's true love because

When he went to San Francisco on business while I had to stay home with the painters and the exterminator and the baby who was getting the chicken pox,

He understood why I hated him,

And because

When I said that playing the stock market was juvenile and irresponsible and then the stock I wouldn't let him buy went up twenty-six points,

I understood why he hated me,

And because

Despite cigarette cough, tooth decay, acid indigestion, dandruff, and other features of married life that tend to dampen the fires of passion,

We still feel something

We can call

True love.

