

Wonder Woman Doesn't Live Here

By Connie J. Schlosberg

Her name is Janine Aaron. She isn't June Cleaver. She's not Hillary Clinton. She's not a supermodel or a corporate executive. She's a 35 year old soft spoken cowgirl who stands no more than 5'4". She lives an ordinary life in an ordinary town with an ordinary job. Janine's been married for ten years to Carl - a burly loud-mouthed hunter - who spends most of his time napping on their couch. She has two pre-school aged children – Jessica and Christopher. She's tired most of the time. She smiles even when she doesn't feel like it.

The Aaron family lives twenty-five miles east of Colorado Springs towards Kansas. The Aaron's joke "When you see the Welcome to Kansas sign, make a right." The tall prairie grass bends sideways under the constant fierce winds. The land is sparse but the panoramic view of the Front Range - where the Rocky Mountains' edge meets up with the Great Plains - is breathtaking. Pronghorn antelope graze. The sun always shines. The air is dry. The nights are filled with coyotes' howls. Some say the moment when the sun rises above the mountain peaks you can see heaven.

Modular homes checker the landscape alongside horse ranches and junk yards. There's a Safeway grocery store with a gas station. One shabby diner that smells like burnt toast and musty cigars. A bedroom town just east of everywhere else in Colorado. That's why the housing is cheap and the lifestyle is simple.

This is the town of Falcon where the columbines grow wild in summertime. Hard working-class folks like the Aarons live here and work in Colorado Springs. American flags grace every porch. Janine will tell you her property is “as big as a postage stamp.” The only thing that separates the Aaron’s house from the rest is the Dale Earnhardt sign proudly standing high in the front yard.

Janine’s day starts well before sunrise. The alarm blares at 1:45 a.m. She glances over at the illuminated red numbers. “One more minute,” she thinks. She knows she doesn’t have a minute. Every minute of her day is accounted for. Any slack in the time will put her behind. Behind in her job, behind in tending to her children’s needs, behind in her chores.

Janine hurries out of bed, grabs the clothes resting on an ottoman nearby and walks to the bathroom to take her shower. She has 15 minutes to wash. Another 15 to get dressed. No time for makeup or magazine hair styles. Just enough time to brush her teeth and swish some mouthwash and throw her waist-length brown hair in a ponytail. She doesn’t exercise. Her job as the inventory manager at Home Depot is her exercise. Janine’s job requires her to be at work before the store opens at 6:00 a.m. to allow her to take stock of what is needed out on the floor and fill empty shelves before the customers start rolling in. She spends most of the day on her feet so her wardrobe consists of sneakers, jeans and either a Minnesota Vikings or San Francisco 49ers sweatshirt.

The coffeepot beeps that it’s ready; Janine smells the dark roasted beans brewing. She dashes to the kitchen and pours coffee into two thermoses located next to the coffeepot. She sets these thermoses next to her car keys, pocketbook and children’s

backpacks filled with clothes. She heads to the fridge and takes out a plastic grocery bag filled with yogurt, granola bars, salad and an apple. Bringing lunch is cheaper than eating out.

It's 2:30 a.m. Her next step is the most challenging. Janine has to wake up four year old Jessica and two year old Christopher. Neither wants to budge from dreaming of Disneyland. They've been begging their parents to take them there. Janine hopes. "Maybe someday we can afford it. It costs about \$5,000."

She goes into Jessica's pink princess room first.

She shakes Jessica's shoulders gently. "Jessica. It's mommy. Time to wake up."

The tow headed Jessica opens her pale blue eyes. "Mommy. Five more minutes. Please."

"Honey. We have to get moving. It's almost 3 o'clock. I have to wake your brother. So come on. Go potty and wash your hands." Janine helps Jessica out of the bed and steers her towards the bathroom.

On the way to Christopher's room, Janine dodges Tonka trucks, matchbox cars and a bouncing ball.

"Christopher. Wake up. Come on boy," she rubs his tousled hair. He doesn't move.

"Christopher. I need you to be a big boy and go potty," she whispers.

Christopher, blond with rosy cheeks, ducks under the covers.

"Where'd you go?" Janine asks but her frown shows she's not amused. The clock is ticking. He rolls out of the bed and starts giggling.

"Okay. Be quiet. Daddy's still sleeping," Janine scolds. Her skin is flushed. She seems frustrated.

Janine's husband Carl is still sleeping and won't need to get up for work for a few more hours. That's if he has any work today. Carl is a 37 year old truck driver for a paving company. He's the guy that paints the yellow and white lines on the highways. It's April - in the Rockies that means snow on any given day. Carl typically works 80 hour weeks, four months out of the year. Any money he makes during the summer has to be carefully saved to last them through the winter.

Meanwhile, she packs up the car with all her accoutrements on the kitchen counter. Then she helps the kids into her Durango SUV with two bumper stickers on the back: 'Freedom isn't free' and 'Race for the cure.' She puts each kid in a car seat. While driving over to the sitter's house, Jessica keeps rubbing her right eye until it turns pink. Janine drops them off with Becky, a woman who lives down the block with kids of her own. Becky is the only person who will watch her kids at such an early hour. Child care centers do not open until 6:00 a.m. Plus, Becky only charges a \$100 per week per child. A corporation will charge Janine double that price. Carl can't be relied upon to take them to a day care center because there's always the possibility that he may need to be at work by that time.

Janine hustles with kids in tow from the car to knock on the door. It's 3:00 a.m. A large older woman - wearing a ratty bathrobe and hair band to keep her curls off of her face - greets them.

"Good morning," Janine says. "I brought *two* outfits for Christopher this time. Just in case he has another accident. I may be a little late in getting out of work today."

"Okay. I don't have a problem with that," Becky yawns.

Jessica and Christopher are bleary-eyed and wobbling into Becky's house. Both are still in their superhero pajamas. Christopher is Spiderman. Jessica is Supergirl. Both will go back to sleep on cots that Becky keeps in her den. Janine still has a guilty conscience of disturbing her children's sleep during the week. "This is best job / can get. It's 4:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m., Monday through Friday. Some sacrifices have to be made." Her voice is matter-of-fact. This is life as a working mother.

"Some stay-at-home moms I know scoff at what I do," she says. "I always tell them. I work to support my family. I don't support my family to work."

Carl's salary of \$30,000 per year is not enough to cover a mortgage, two cars, groceries, clothing and an occasional family night at the movies. Just the basics in 21st century American living. According to the United States Census Bureau, 55 percent of American mothers work outside the home. More than 687,000 day care centers support over two million children under the age of five. With the current economy and the high cost of living in the United States, a lot of mothers need to work and help support their family financially. Most times – as in Janine's situation - it's not a choice to work; it's a necessity.

Now Janine has 45 minutes to get to the other side of Colorado Springs. Down the only two-lane roadway that connects different worlds. Desolate ground turns to upslope hillsides making its way to suburbia. Darkness is upon the road and in Janine's mind. Neon lights bounce off of buildings in the distance - her only indication of her destination. The long drive is taxing on her. She gets less than six hours of sleep a night.

Driving into the parking lot at Home Depot, she sees only five cars parked in the rear of the store. The usually busy giant warehouse is empty. Magpies chirp and twitter. They've nested themselves high up in the racking in the outside garden. Field mice scurry along the concrete cold floors, hiding between grass seed.

Her workdays unravel the same each time: clock in, put her orange apron on, put her stuff in her locker, grab a mobile ordering cart and go to her departments. A work list has already been placed on her cart from the night manager. Inventory manager is a fancy title for buyer. Janine buys products for the Hardware, Lumber and Building Material departments. "Stack it high and watch it fly is the motto here," she says.

Janine spends part of her day counting such things as light bulbs, screwdrivers, particle board. Nails are the tedious ones to count. "Nothing like spending your morning counting nails. Hundreds of them lying knee-deep in boxes," she says wrinkling her brow. Whatever merchandise is left and whatever is missing – she orders more.

The products come in boxed and on palettes. She's responsible for unpacking and placing each one onto the shelves, tagging each item with a label. She has no fear of climbing up steep ladders. She doesn't mind the dirt under her fingernails, but her glasses are another story. She's always sneezing. The musty odor of dust permeates through the lumber department. She can't lift heavy boxes. Her toothpick frame can't lift more than 40 pounds.

She knows it's not a career; it's a job. Wages are \$13.95 per hour with health benefits and vacation time.

The Aarons judge each week by the paychecks. A 2004 Temple University survey states about 70 percent of Americans live this way. More than half of the 1,000 respondents said they had only \$10,000 in savings. The Aarons have \$9,775.13 saved.

The couple can't afford to lose any money. Not so long ago, around February, Janine got a call at Home Depot from Becky.

"Jessica threw up. It's the second time since early this morning," Becky told her.

"Can you wait until I get out of work? I only have a couple of more hours." Janine pleaded with her.

"I don't think it's fair to the other children. I'm sure your boss will understand," Becky replied.

"It's not so much about my boss. I don't have any personal time left to take. I won't accrue any more time until next month," Janine said.

After the phone call with Becky, Janine called Carl to see if he could pick up the kids.

"Carl. Can you get Jessica and Christopher? Jessica is throwing up and I can't leave work. I don't have enough hours left to cover it," Janine asked.

"I can't leave Janine. I have to wait by the phone in case work calls. I'm on call." Carl shouted at her. She hates when he yells. Her hands shake. Her head sweats. He can be frightening.

"Fine. Don't be mad when I'm missing 28 bucks from my pay." Janine hung up on him.

"He could have picked those kids up. He has a cell phone. He doesn't want to be bothered." She was forced to leave work. "I can't miss even two hours of pay."

She sighs when she remembers this moment. She clenches a wad of tissue, lifting her eyes to hold back pooling tears. Janine reflects on her life choices. "I haven't made the best decisions. I have no perception. I never look at the future."

She grew up in rural Minnesota, just a few minutes south of the Canadian border. Her parents owned a farm. Her graduating class of 1990 had 14 kids. She left home after high school, moving to Austin, Texas, for a short time and then to the Rocky Mountains. She worked as a cocktail waitress for the Wild Horse Casino in Cripple Creek, Colorado – an old Victorian mining town catering to gamblers. Then she met Carl, got married, bought the only house they could afford, and gave birth to two kids. Just like her mother and father - except this is 2007 not 1970 – and Janine's mom didn't need to work.

Sometimes while performing her mundane job - typing barcode numbers onto a keyboard - she daydreams. Staring into the vapid blackness of her computer, Janine smiles remembering her days growing up. How her mother and the other ladies in the neighborhood would meet at someone's house for coffee and cake after their husbands went off to work. They'd wear their ruffled housecoats; her mother still had curlers in her hair. Some would smoke cigarettes putting their ashes into kitschy ashtrays. "Mom would always bake a spiced apple cake for her friends," she says. "The ladies loved it. The smell of sweet cider lingered for a couple of days."

Other times at work, she thinks about being a housewife married to a lawyer or doctor, living at the Broadmoor - the wealthiest neighborhood in town. Their French villa would loom high above the plains, on a hilltop road heading into the mountains. Her husband would eat the breakfast she made him and venture off to his practice. She'd

spend her morning fussing with her hair and make-up; maybe make an appointment for a manicure later that day. Then she'd get in her Hummer - the bright yellow one - to meet at the tony Shops at Briargate with the other ladies in the neighborhood. They'd go out to lunch at a chic café. Her mouth waters thinking about dining on fettuccine with escarole. She'd order one of those fruity drinks with French names she can't pronounce. She'd eat with real silverware and porcelain dishes. Nothing like she'd find at Frankie's - her local hangout. She'd wear those skinny high heels - the strappy kind - to show off her pedicured toes. They'd talk about such things as who has a great nanny and where to get the latest Louis Vuitton purse.

She realizes that a cowgirl would never fit in.

Back to reality, Janine eats lunch at 10:00 a.m. She sits with other working moms talking about day-care woes. Brianne, a younger heavysset brunette, is looking for a new center. "My daughter Jolene has been bit four times by the same kid. The teacher won't do anything about it," Brianne says. "I can't just go anywhere. My ex-husband pays the bill. He can't afford some of the better places in the Springs." Janine suggests using an at-home babysitter. Someone like Becky. "She's been the best for me. I only pay when the kids are there," Janine says.

Janine's final hours at work are spent stocking those 18 feet orange racks with more light bulbs, nuts, bolts and nails of all sizes. She climbs down the ladder and brushes the dirt off of her jeans. There are small tears in the pants right where she kneels. Her work day ends similar to how it begins: put her cart back, unload her locker, take her apron off and clock out.

She is still smiling but her day is far from over. She hops into her SUV and turns back on to the same two lane road heading east towards home. She can't wait to hear about her children's day. They are her only inspiration of what gets her out of bed everyday. "You don't know true love until you have children," she says.

She imagines who they will become. She wants them to go to college. Each pay day she has ten dollars automatically deducted from her pay. Her goal is to have \$10,000 saved to help pay for their college education. That's the most she wishes for.

Now it's 1:40 p.m. in the afternoon. Janine parks on Becky's driveway. Jessica and Christopher come running out the door, happy faces and backpacks in tow. "Mommy." Both shout in unison. Janine gets out of the car and gives them each a kiss and a hug.

"Let's get in the car. We have to do some grocery shopping and then get home and make dinner," Janine says.

"Mommy look at me," Christopher says. He has two straws sticking out of his nose.

"So how was your day?" Janine asks.

"My day is fine, mommy." Jessica says.

"Mommy look at me," Christopher repeats. "Mommy *look at me*. Mommy!"

Janine looks back in her rear view mirror. "I see Christopher. Take the straws out of your nose."

"Mommy I can spell cat and dog," Jessica says.

"Really? Tell me," Janine responds.

"C – A – T. That's Cat," Jessica says proudly. "D – O – G. Dog."

"Wonderful," Janine says, "You're smart. Pretty soon you'll be ready for kindergarten."

At the grocery store, Janine and the kids make their way to the frozen food section in the back of the store. She picks out four TV dinners: one meatloaf and mashed potatoes for Carl, one chicken pot pie for her and turkey dinners with chocolate pudding desserts for the kids. Most days Janine acts as a short order cook. Carl wants hamburgers, the kids want hot dogs, and she prefers a salad. However, this afternoon she will be busy doing laundry and paying bills.

When they get home, Carl is fiddling with his old truck in the garage. Transmission troubles again. He didn't work today. Janine's fuming but trying not to think about it. She grabs the grocery bag and starts to walk inside the house. The see-through plastic bag reveals the TV dinners.

"The lazy way out, huh, Janine," Carl laughs.

"I'm anything but lazy," she mumbles to herself. The kids play ball out in the front yard.

At 5:30 p.m., they watch the evening news while they eat dinner. The weatherman jokes that another blizzard might be hitting the plains. The Aarons are not amused. "Well I guess we'll dip into the savings account if we have to," Carl moans. "I can't control Mother Nature."

After dinner Janine gives the kids baths, reads them stories and puts them to bed. She collects the hampers from each bedroom and carries them to the laundry room. She divides the clothes: whites, colors, jeans, and towels. She moans, "Oh, I can't remember if I told Christopher I love him." She forgets a lot.

She picks up the towels and lumps them together to form a pillow, placing them on top of the dryer. She puts her head down on the pillow. The softness of the towels feels good for a few seconds.

Then she gets back to her chore. Each day she works on a different house chore. It's the only way to get it all done. Her goal is to have minimum work on the weekends. She insists weekends are for family time only.

She looks in the dusty mirror hanging in the hallway. There are black circles underneath her eyes. Her laugh lines have turned from fine etches to thick furrows. She doesn't care. She's still content. She has Jessica and Christopher.

The late night news is on; Carl's asleep on the couch. Janine shrugs her shoulders. It's 10:00 p.m. "Well, I'm going to bed." She puts her night clothes on, gets in bed (alone) and drifts to sleep.

The alarm beeps. It's 1:45 a.m. again. The days melt into each other. Her routine is the same as always. Wake up, get dressed, make coffee, wake up her dreary eyed children, load up the SUV and head down the driveway onward into life. Soon her neighbors will follow.

Husbands and wives are going to work with their children in tow. Some children will stay with grandma, some will go to a child care center, some will go to school. After everyone has gone, the houses are deserted and the streets are empty. The aroma of stale coffee doesn't even linger around. No sounds of vacuums running along carpets, no wails from unhappy children, no souls on the Aarons' street. It will remain this way until evening falls.