

## Journalism: A Love Story

By Nora Ephron

What I remember is that there was a vocational day during my freshman year in high school, and you had to choose which vocation you wanted to learn about. I chose journalism. I have no idea why. Part of the reason must have had to do with Lois Lane, and part with a wonderful book I'd been given one Christmas, called *A Treasury of Great Reporting*. The journalist who spoke at the vocational event was a woman sportswriter for the *Los Angeles Times*. She was very charming, and she mentioned in the course of her talk that there were very few women in the newspaper business. As I listened to her, I suddenly realized that I desperately wanted to be a journalist and that being a journalist was probably a good way to meet men.

So I can't remember which came first—wanting to be a journalist or wanting to date a journalist. The two thoughts were completely smashed up together.

I worked on the newspaper in high school and college, and a week before graduating from Wellesley in 1962, I found a job in New York City. I'd gone to an employment agency on West 42nd Street. I told the woman there I wanted to be a journalist, and she said, "How would you like to work at *Newsweek* magazine?" I said fine. She picked up the phone, made an appointment for me, and sent me right over to the Newsweek Building, at 444 Madison Avenue.

The man who interviewed me asked why I wanted to work at *Newsweek*. I think I was supposed to say something like, "Because it's such an important magazine," but I had no real feelings about the magazine one way or another. I had barely read *Newsweek*; in those days, it was a sorry second to Time. So I said I wanted to work there because I hoped to become a writer. I was quickly assured that women didn't become writers at *Newsweek*. It would never have crossed my mind to object or to say, "You're going to turn out to be wrong about me." It was given in 1962 that if you were a woman and you wanted to do certain things, you were going to have to be the exception to the rule. I was hired as a mail girl, for \$55 a week.

There were no mail boys at *Newsweek*, only mail girls. If you were a college graduate (like me) who had worked on your college newspaper (like me) and you were a girl (like me), they hired you as a mail girl. If you were a boy (unlike me) with exactly the same qualifications, they hired you as a reporter and sent you to a bureau somewhere in America.

My job couldn't have been more prosaic: Mail girls delivered the mail. This was a long time ago, when there was a huge amount of mail, and it arrived in large sacks all day long. I was no mere mail girl, though; I was the Elliott girl. This meant that on Friday nights I worked late, often until three in the morning, delivering copy back and forth from the writers to the editors, one of whom was named Osborn Elliott. Then I had to be back at work early Saturday, when the Nation and Foreign departments closed. It was exciting in its own self-absorbed way, which is very much the essence of journalism: You come to believe that you are living at the center of the universe and that the world out there is on tenterhooks waiting for the next copy of whatever publication you work at.

There were telex machines in a glass-enclosed area adjacent to the lobby, and one of my jobs was to rip off the telexes, which usually contained dispatches from the reporters in the bureaus, and to deliver them to the writers and editors. One night a telex arrived concerning the owner of *Newsweek*, Philip Graham. He was a tall, handsome guy's guy who would walk through the office, smiling a great white toothy grin, cracking jokes, his voice booming. He was in a manic phase of his manic depression, but no one knew this; no one even knew what manic depression was.

Graham had married Katharine Meyer, whose father owned *The Washington Post*, and he now ran the *Post* and the publishing empire that controlled *Newsweek*. But according to the telex, he was in the midst of a crackup and was having a very public affair with a young woman who worked for *Newsweek*. He had misbehaved at some event or other and had used the word "fuck" in the course of it all. It was a big deal to say the word "fuck" in that era. This is one of the things that drives me absolutely crazy when I see movies that take place in the '50s and early '60s; people are always saying "fuck" in them. Trust me, no one threw the word around then the way they do now.

Philip Graham's nervous breakdown—which ended finally in his suicide—was constantly under whispered discussion by the editors, and because I read all the telexes and was within earshot, even of whispers, I was riveted. There was a morgue at *Newsweek*—a library of clippings available for research. Morgues are one of the great joys of working in journalism. I went to it and pulled all the clips about Graham and read them between errands. I was fascinated by the story of this wildly attractive man and the rich girl he'd married.

Years later, in Kay Graham's autobiography, I read their letters and realized that they'd once been in love, but as I

went through the clips, I couldn't imagine it. He seemed an ambitious young man who'd made a calculated match. Now the marriage was falling apart before my very eyes, and this almost made up for the fact that I was doing entirely menial work.

After a few months, I was promoted to the next stage of girlhood at *Newsweek*: I became a clipper. Being a clipper entailed clipping newspapers from around the country. We all sat at something called the clip desk, armed with rip sticks and grease pencils, and we ripped up the country's newspapers and routed the clips to the relevant department. For instance, if someone cured cancer in St. Louis, we sent the clipping to the Medicine section. Being a clipper was a horrible job, and to make matters worse, I was good at it.

So three months later, I was promoted again, this time to the highest rung: I became a researcher. *Researcher* was a fancy word for fact-checker, and that's pretty much what the job consisted of. I worked in the Nation Department. There were six writers and six fact-checkers, and we worked from Tuesday to Saturday night, when the magazine closed. For most of the week, none of us did anything. Then on Friday afternoon, all the files came in from the bureaus, and the writers wrote their stories and gave them to us researchers to check.

We checked a story by referring to whatever factual material existed; occasionally we made a phone call or did some minor reporting. Newsmagazine writers in those days were famous for using the expression "tk," which stood for "to come"; they were always writing sentences like, "There are tk lightbulbs in the chandelier in the chamber of the House of Representatives," and part of our job as researchers was to find out just how many lightbulbs there were.

When you had checked the facts and were convinced they were accurate, you underlined the sentence. You were done checking a piece when every word in it had been underlined. One Tuesday morning we all arrived at work and discovered a gigantic crisis. One of the Nation stories in that week's *Newsweek* had been published with a spelling error: Konrad Adenauer's first name was spelled with a C instead of a K. The blame fell not to the writer (male) who had first misspelled the name, or to the many senior editors (male) and copy editors (male) who had edited the story, but to the two researchers (female) who'd checked it. They had been confronted and were busy arguing over which of them had underlined the word *Conrad*. "That is not my underlining," one of them was saying.

With hindsight, of course, I can see how brilliantly institutionalized the sexism was at *Newsweek*. For every man, an inferior woman. For every male writer, a female drone. For every flamboyant inventor of a meaningless-but-unknown detail, a young drudge who could be counted on to fill it in. For every executive who erred, an underling to pin it on. But it was way too early in the decade for me to notice that.

By then I had become friends with Victor Navasky. He was the editor of a satirical magazine called *Monocle*, and he seemed to know everyone. He knew important people, and he knew people who he made you think were important, simply because he knew them. *Monocle* came out only sporadically but it produced a lot of parties, and I met people there who became my friends for life, including Victor's wife, Annie, Calvin Trillin, and John Gregory Dunne. Victor also introduced me to Jane Green, who was an editor at *Show* magazine, a glamorous publication devoted to show business, culture, and style. She was an older woman, about 25, chic and sophisticated, and she knew everyone too. She introduced me to my first omelet, my first brie, and my first vitello tonnato. She used the word *painterly* and tried to explain it to me. She asked me what kind of Jew I was. Jane was a German Jew, which was not to say she was from Germany but that her grandparents had been. She was extremely pleased about it. I had no idea it mattered. (And by the way, it didn't, really; those days were over.)

I could go on endlessly about the things I learned from Jane. She told me all about de Kooning and took me to the Museum of Modern Art to see pop and op art. She taught me the difference between Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe. She'd dated a number of well-known journalists and writers. Eventually, I went to bed with one of them, and that was the end of our friendship, but that's getting ahead of things.

One day, Victor called up to say he'd managed to raise \$10,000 to put out parodies of the New York newspapers, and asked if I would write a parody of Leonard Lyons' gossip column in the *New York Post*. I said yes, although I had no idea what to do. I called my friend Marcia, who'd babysat Leonard Lyons' son's dogs, and asked what the deal was with Lyons. She explained that his column was a series of anecdotes with no point whatsoever. I read a few weeks' worth of Lyons' columns in the morgue at *Newsweek* and wrote the parody. Parodies are very odd things. I've written only about a half dozen of them; they come on you like the wind, and you write them almost possessed. It's as close as a writer gets to acting—almost as if you're in character for a short time, and then it passes.

The papers Victor produced—the *New York Pest* and the *Dally News*—made their way to the newsstands, but

they didn't sell. This was long before the *National Lampoon* and *The Onion*. But everyone in the business read them. They were funny. The editors of the *Post* wanted to sue, but the publisher of the *Post*, Dorothy Schiff, said, "Don't be ridiculous. If they can parody the *Post*, they can write for it." So the editors called Victor and Victor called me and asked if I'd be interested in trying out for a job at the *Post*.

I went down to the offices on West Street a few days later, a freezing day in February. I took the elevator to the second floor and walked down the long dingy hall and into the City Room. I couldn't imagine I was in the right place. It was large and dusty, with dirty windows looking out at the Hudson—not that you could see anything through the windows. Sitting in a clump of desks in the winter dark was a group of three or four editors. They offered me a reporting tryout.

There were seven newspapers in New York at that time, and the *Post* was the least of them, circulation-wise. Still, the paper had a solid base of devoted readers. I took a two-week leave of absence from *Newsweek* and began my tryout. I'd prepared by studying the *Post*, but more important, by being coached by Jane, who'd worked there briefly. She explained everything I needed to know. She told me that the *Post* was an afternoon newspaper and the stories in it were known as "overnights"; they were not to be confused with the news stories in the morning papers. They were feature stories, they had a point of view, they were the reason people bought an afternoon paper in addition to a morning paper. She also told me that when I got an assignment, never to say, "I don't understand" or "Where exactly is it?" or "How do I get in touch with them?" Go back to your desk, she said, and figure it out. Pull the clips. Look in the telephone book. Call your friends. Do anything but ask the editor what to do or how to get there.

The *Post* city room was a relic, really—a period set for a 1930s newsroom. Everyone smoked, but there were no ashtrays; the burning cigarettes rested on the edge of the desks and left dark smudge marks. There were not enough desks to go around, so unless you'd been there for 20 years, you didn't have your own desk, or even a drawer; finding a place to sit was sort of like musical chairs. Anyway, the chairs were broken. The doors leading into the City Room had frosted glass panels that were so dusty that someone had written the word "Philthy" on them with a finger. I couldn't have cared less. I had spent almost half of my life wanting to be a newspaper reporter, and now I had a shot at it.

I had four bylines my first week. I interviewed the actress Tippi Hedren. I went to the Coney Island aquarium to write about two hooded seals that were refusing to mate. I interviewed an Italian film director named Nanni Loy. I covered a murder on West 82nd Street. On Friday afternoon, I was offered a job at the paper. One of the reporters took me out for a drink that night, to a bar called the Front Page. That's what it was called, the Front Page. Later, we took a taxi up Madison Avenue, and we passed the *Newsweek* Building. I looked up at the eleventh floor where the lights were ablaze and I thought to myself, "Up there they are closing next week's edition of *Newsweek* magazine, and nobody really gives a damn." It was a stunning revelation.

Of course the *Post* was a zoo. The editor was a sexual predator. The managing editor was a lunatic. Sometimes it seemed that half the staff was drunk. But I loved my job. In my first year there, I learned how to write. The editors and copy editors actually nurtured me. They assigned me short pieces at first, then longer pieces, then five-part series. I learned by doing, and after a while, I had an instinctive sense of structure. There was a brilliant copy editor, Fred McMorrow, who would walk my story back to me and explain why he was making the changes he was making. Never begin a story with a quote, he said. Never use anything but "said." Never put anything you really care about into the last paragraph, because it will undoubtedly be cut for space. There was a great features editor, Joe Rabinovich, who saved me from woeful idiocy when Tom Wolfe began writing for the *Herald-Tribune* and I made a pathetic attempt to write exactly like him. The executive editor Stan Opotowsky came up with a series of offbeat assignments for me. I wrote about heat waves and cold snaps; I covered the Beatles, and Bobby Kennedy, and the *Star of India* robbery.

The *Post* had a bare-bones staff, but more women worked there than worked at all the other New York papers combined. The greatest of the rewrite men at the *Post* was a woman named Helen Dudar. *Hello, sweetheart, get me rewrite*. In those days, the *Post* published six editions a day, starting at 11 a.m. and ending with the 4:30 stock market final. When news broke, reporters in the street would phone in the details from pay phones and rewrite men would write the stories. The city room was right next to the press room, and the noise—of reporters typing, pressmen linotyping, wire machines clacking, and presses rolling—was a journalistic fantasy.

I worked at the *Post* for five years. Then I became a magazine writer. I believed in journalism. I believed in truth. I believed that when people claimed they'd been misquoted, they were just having trouble seeing their words in cold, hard print. I believed that when political activists claimed that news organizations conspired against them, they had no idea that most journalistic enterprises were far too inept to harbor conspiracy. I believed that I was temperamentally

suited to journalism because of my cynicism and emotional detachment, which I sometimes allowed were character flaws, but didn't really believe.

I married a journalist, and that didn't work. But then I married another, and it did.

Now I know that there's no such thing as the truth. That people are constantly misquoted. That news organizations are full of conspiracy (and that anyway, ineptness is a kind of conspiracy). That emotional detachment and cynicism only get you so far.

But for many years I was in love with journalism. I loved the pack. I loved smoking and drinking Scotch and playing dollar poker. I didn't know much about anything, and I was in a profession where you didn't have to. I loved the deadlines. I loved the speed. I loved that you wrapped the fish.

I'd known since I was a child that I was going to live in New York eventually, and that everything in between would just be an intermission. I'd spent all those years imagining that it was going to be the most exciting, magical, fraught-with-possibility place I could ever live; a place where if I really wanted something, I might be able to get it; a place where I'd be surrounded by people I was dying to know; a place where I might become the only thing worth being—a journalist.

And I'd turned out to be right.

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