



the most of
Nora
Ephron

*'I am only one of the millions of
women who will miss Nora's voice'*

LENA DUNHAM

**Introduction by
INDIA
KNIGHT**



About the Book

Nora Ephron's brilliantly funny writing paved the way for female wits like Lena Dunham and Tina Fey. Here is a comprehensive anthology of Nora Ephron's writings on journalism, feminism, and being a woman; on the importance of food (including of course her favourite recipes), and on the bittersweet reality of growing old. As well as many personal pieces from the writer who always sounded like your ideal BFF, this collection includes extracts from her bestselling novel *Heartburn*, written in the wake of her devastating divorce from Carl Bernstein, and from her hilarious screenplay for the movie *When Harry Met Sally*, as well as the complete text of her recent play *Lucky Guy*, published here for the first time.

Contents

Cover

About the Book

Title Page

Introduction to the British Edition by India Knight

Introduction by Robert Gottlieb

The Journalist

Introduction to *Wallflower at the Orgy*

Journalism: A Love Story

How to Write a Newsmagazine Cover Story

The Assassination Reporters

The Palm Beach Social Pictorial

The Boston Photographs

Russell Baker

The Detroit News

The Ontario Bulletin

Gentlemen's Agreement

I Just Want to Say: The World Is Not Flat

The Making of Theodore H. White

The Advocate

Vaginal Politics

Miami

Reunion

Commencement Address to Wellesley Class of 1996

The Profiler: Some Women

Helen Gurley Brown: "If You're a Little Mouseburger,
Come with Me ..."

Dorothy Schiff and the *New York Post*

Dorothy Parker

Lillian Hellman: *Pentimento*

Jan Morris: *Conundrum*

Pat Loud: *No, But I Read the Book*

Julie Nixon Eisenhower: *The Littlest Nixon*

Lisbeth Salander: *The Girl Who Fixed the Umlaut*

The Novelist

Heartburn

The Playwright

Lucky Guy

The Screenwriter

When Harry Met Sally ...

The Foodie

Serial Monogamy: A Memoir

Baking Off

I Just Want to Say: The Egg-White Omelette

Gourmet Magazine

A Sandwich

I Just Want to Say: Teflon

The Food Establishment: Life in the Land of the Rising

Soufflé (Or Is It the Rising Meringue?)

About Having People to Dinner

The Blogger

The First Annual "Tell Us What You're Cooking This Year
for Thanksgiving Dinner That You Didn't Cook Last
Year"

Hello. By the Way. Whatever.

Deep Throat and Me: Now It Can Be Told, and Not for the First Time Either

The Curious Incident of the Veep in the Summertime

Hooked on Anonymity

One Small Blog

On Bill Clinton

A Million Little Embellishments

Scooter, Rosa Lopez, and the Grassy Knoll

Reflections on Reading the Results of President Bush's Annual Physical Examination

My Weekend in Vegas

O. J. Again

Say It Ain't So, Rupe

Melancholy Babies

Take My Secretary of State, Please

On Being Named Person of the Year

Condi's Diary

Some People

What Did You Do in the War?

How to Foil a Terrorist Plot in Seven Simple Steps

My Top Ten New Year's Resolutions

Hooked on Hillary

White Men

It Ought to Be a Word

Personal

The Story of My Life in 3,500 Words or Less

The Legend

Me and JFK: Now It Can Be Told

A Few Words About Breasts

The Mink Coat

Parenting in Three Stages

The D Word

Fantasies

On Maintenance

The Six Stages of E-mail
Considering the Alternative
On Rapture
Revision and Life: Take It from the Top—Again
I Feel Bad About My Neck
What I Wish I'd Known
I Hate My Purse
Christmas Dinner
I Remember Nothing
The O Word
What I Won't Miss
What I Will Miss

About the Author
Also by Nora Ephron
Copyright

The
MOST
of
Nora
Ephron

Introduction to the British Edition by India Knight

Nora Ephron, who died in 2012, left a legacy stretching far beyond Hollywood: she taught us how to live our messy lives. I often think, when someone famous has died at a ripe old age, that some of the keening and rending of garments is overegged. It is as though we are surprised, scandalized, appalled by the fact that old people who have lived rich, splendid lives should die, so we respond as though they were not old people but children and bandy about words such as “tragic”. Except the deaths are not untimely at all: people get old, and old people eventually die, and it is sad, but there you are. Decent innings and all that—they’re not four years old. Nora Ephron, though: that is a whole other thing. Like anyone who has come across her or her work in its various incarnations, I really liked the idea of Ephron reporting back bittersweetly, cleverly, beadily, comfortingly on the indignities of female old age; I would love to have watched a film scripted by her on the subject—who on earth is there to script such a film now she is gone?

She visited this territory in her last two books, *I Feel Bad about My Neck* and *I Remember Nothing*, but she was not quite old enough yet. You got the feeling that these were rich pickings and she had only just got going. She was 71 when she died in June 2012 of pneumonia; five years earlier she had been diagnosed with an acute form of leukaemia, although she had successfully kept that a secret from almost everyone. She did not look 71—“I look as young as a person can look, given how old I am”—but she wrote about ageing brilliantly: “You have to cut open a redwood tree to

see how old it is, but you wouldn't have to if it had a neck," or: "Why do people write books that say it's better to be older than to be younger? It's not better. Even if you have all your marbles, you're constantly reaching for the name of the person you met the day before yesterday."

If that is too depressing, she also wrote, a year before she died, that she would never want to go back to her twenties or thirties but that she would leap at the chance to be magicked back to her forties, fifties and sixties, the best years. One of her pieces of advice to the young was: "Never marry a man you wouldn't want to be divorced from." Also: "Oh, how I regret not having worn a bikini for the entire year I was 26. If anyone young is reading this, go, right this minute, put on a bikini, and don't take it off until you're 34."

Ephron's tone was knowing, funny and smart. In an essay entitled *On Maintenance*, she described the endless amount of effort it took her to look halfway presentable once old age took hold: "The amount of maintenance involving hair is genuinely overwhelming. Sometimes I think that not having to worry about your hair any more is the secret upside of death." Towards the end of the essay, Ephron sees an unkempt, grey-haired homeless woman with a moustache, a monobrow and grubby nails. She concludes that she is "only about eight hours a week away from looking exactly like that woman on the street".

No matter how improbable the circumstance, there was always a strong domestic undercurrent in her writing. I love the generosity and empathy inherent in this, especially coming from someone of her vintage, who could be forgiven for believing that a woman's place was anywhere but the kitchen, even though this would bypass the simple fact that a) women tend to spend quite a lot of time in kitchens and it does not mean they are chattels, and b) food is nice. Ephron was too clever to ignore the crashingly obvious or to pretend, on the pretext of following orders, to

believe in things that did not stand up; she would never have made a politician. She called herself a feminist, but she scarcely prattled the party line. Taking note of the incredible rivalries and animosities among feminists in the 1970s, Ephron wrote in her book *Crazy Salad* (1975): "The women's liberation movement at this point in history makes the American Communist party of the 1930s look like a monolith." Jonathan Yardley, revisiting the book in 2004 in the *Washington Post*, notes Ephron's reluctance to march with the feminist orthodoxy. "Perhaps," he writes, "after surpassingly turgid feminist tomes such as Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics*, readers were ready for a fresh, undogmatic, cheeky view of a subject about which too many people clearly had gotten entirely too solemn."

Crazy Salad, a sort of early version of Caitlin Moran's bestselling *How to Be a Woman*, sold by the truckload for the same reasons: fewer immutable diktats, less angry theory, more real life written by someone recognizably sane, funny and clever. Its tone enabled Ephron to say, later in life, that feminism was all very well, but "there's a reason why 40, 50 and 60 don't look the way they used to, and it's not because of feminism, or better living through exercise. It's because of hair dye."

She was bang-on where it mattered, though: giving the 1996 commencement address to the graduating students of her all-women alma mater, Wellesley College (Ephron studied political science), she said: "In my business, the movie business, there are many more women directors, but it's just as hard to make a movie about women as it ever was, and look at the parts the Oscar-nominated actresses played this year: hooker, hooker, hooker, hooker and nun. It's 1996, and you are graduating from Wellesley in the year of the Wonderbra. The Wonderbra is not a step forward for women. Nothing that hurts that much is a step forward for women."

Ephron's unapologetic domestic streak manifested itself most obviously with the recipes and foodie anecdotes with which she studded her books; she was wonderfully, headily greedy, particularly for one so Manhattanishly whip-thin (low-carbing, according to an essay in *I Remember Nothing*). Her heavily autobiographical only novel, *Heartburn*, charts the breakdown of a marriage, with recipes; not only that, but the recipes work brilliantly. Ephron, "Rachel" in the book, was in real life married to Carl Bernstein ("Mark"), who, with Bob Woodward, uncovered the Watergate scandal; they were a Washington power couple, upper middle class, intellectual, glitzy, neurotic in the American manner. While Ephron was pregnant with their second child, Bernstein started an affair with Margaret (now Baroness) Jay, for reasons that Ephron/Rachel found puzzling: Jay's fictionalized doppelganger, Thelma Rice, has "a neck as long as an arm and a nose as long as a thumb" and, as I recall, enormous feet. In life as in *Heartburn*, Bernstein left Ephron when she was heavily pregnant. In the book, the narrator avenges herself by telling le tout DC that Thelma Rice has VD.

In real life, of course, she avenged herself by writing it all down; the book was a bestseller and was later turned into a film starring Jack Nicholson and Meryl Streep. Except it was not really vengeance: the defining theme of Ephron's writing, whether it is film, novel or memoir, is that when bad things happen, you address them directly, cobble together a solution as best you can and move on, never looking back; if you can at some point laugh at your misfortune, all the better. She was whatever the opposite of self-pitying is, and you get the sense that, at some level, she thought of herself as the willing victim of a huge cosmic joke. *Heartburn* is as hilarious as it is heart-breaking and as brittle (very) as it is steely (even more). I discussed it a couple of years ago on a book programme on

Radio 4. The other guest was the singer Richard Hawley; we had both been asked to pick a favourite novel. He chose *Tortilla Flat* by John Steinbeck. I picked *Heartburn*. We had to read each other's books in order to have a discussion; he might as well have chosen *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* to my *Brideshead Revisited*. Hawley was less than enchanted by my choice—although he admitted the book had made him laugh—and said something like (I cannot find the recording, so I paraphrase): “These awful rich, spoilt people and their rich, spoilt, messy lives—what’s the matter with them?”

That criticism is precisely one of the things I love about *Heartburn* and about Ephron's work generally (it has been observed, rightly, that the films she scripted feature super-articulate, affluent people in super-lovely, affluent interiors; part of her skill is that the viewer seldom resents this). She wrote brilliantly and without embarrassment about the world she not only inhabited but embodied. Why pretend? She was the kind of woman who liked good clothes (“Don't buy anything 100% wool even if it seems to be very soft and not particularly itchy when you try it on in the store”) and manicures (“Sometimes it seemed there were more nail places in Manhattan than there were nails”) and saw no reason that this should be indicative of some sort of fatal frothiness. Some female writers in the public eye pretend they do not have a cleaner and make their bit of postcode sound edgier than it is, so you can feel they are more like you. She was their opposite. It helped, of course, that she had a mind like a steel trap and that she was so good at her job that, whatever your circumstances, when you were reading her you felt she was more like you than anyone else alive.

The steel-trap mind was born in Manhattan and, from the age of four, bred and honed in Beverly Hills, though she legged it to New York, with which she had a passionate, lifelong love affair, as a young woman. She was the eldest

of four sisters, all of whom became writers. Her parents were successful Hollywood screenwriters; one of Ephron's early memories was of her mother sitting at the dinner table and saying: "Everything is copy." And so it was, too, for Nora, who made her name as a journalist with pieces about the appalling smallness of her breasts; the ghastly blandness of egg-white omelettes; therapy; the difficulties surrounding inheritance; feminism; her parents' alcoholism; the unbelievable deliciousness of butter—she was Jewish but, asked if she practised a religion, said: "You can never have too much butter—that is my belief. If I have a religion, that's it"—the pain of being left; the horror of wrinkles; the bliss of reading—"Reading is everything. Reading makes me feel like I've accomplished something, learnt something, become a better person".

In *I Remember Nothing*, she wrote a list of the things she would miss when she died. These included her kids, Nick Pileggi (her third husband, to whom she was married for 20 years; when asked to contribute to a book of six-word memoirs, she wrote: "Secret to life, marry an Italian"), waffles, the concept of waffles, bacon, the park, bed, Paris, taking a bath, and pie. The things she wouldn't miss included "panels on Women in Film", mammograms, bad dinners and bras.

Nora Ephron will probably be best remembered for her talents as a scriptwriter: her cinema work—she directed and produced as well as wrote—was outstanding; you would want to garland her even if she had never done anything else. But they were the tip of a gigantic talent iceberg: she was a journalist, an essayist, a novelist, a wife, a mother. She wrote plays as well as books and wrote incredibly well about food, which may seem an odd thing to single out but is extremely difficult. She was, in her youth, an intern for John F. Kennedy, and remarked in 2003 that she was probably the only one he never hit on. She was nominated for dozens of august awards, including three

Oscars, and won some. In what we must, I suppose, call her old age, she became a blogger for the *Huffington Post*, notably writing about Ryan O’Neal failing to recognize his own daughter and making a pass at her at his ex-wife’s funeral.

At the Wellesley address in 1996, she told the graduates: “What are you going to do? Everything, is my guess. It will be a little messy, but embrace the mess. It will be complicated, but rejoice in the complications. It will not be anything like what you think it will be like, but surprises are good for you. And don’t be frightened: you can always change your mind. I know: I’ve had four careers and three husbands ... I hope that you choose not to be a lady.” Nora Ephron was a lady, though she may not have thought of herself as one, and she was also a total dame, the person you wanted to grow up and turn into—as well as, it goes without saying, being the imaginary fairy godmother of all women who choose to make a living by the pen and their wits. “Above all, be the heroine of your life, not the victim,” she told the class of ’96. People give platitudinous advice all the time in these sorts of circumstances, but Ephron’s line about refusing to be the victim was the line she willed herself to live by until it became true. She was a heroine, pure and simple.

—*India Knight*

Introduction

A couple of years before Nora's death in 2012, she and I sat down to begin putting together the table of contents for this book. Then other things got in the way—her play, *Lucky Guy*; a movie script she was working on—and it was set aside. Perhaps, too, knowing how ill she was, she began to see the book as a memorial and that made her uncomfortable—she never said. But although I was aware of her dire medical situation, the original impulse behind the book was not to memorialize but to celebrate the richness of her work, the amazing arc of her career, and the place she had come to hold in the hearts of so many readers.

The reaction to her death was an outpouring of disbelief and grief. Before the publication of her two final collections—*I Feel Bad About My Neck* and *I Remember Nothing*—she was, of course, admired and enjoyed for both her writing and her movies, but the readership of these last books seemed to me to be on another level. It was personal. Her readers not only felt that they knew her but that she knew them. Obviously, not all the people—more than a million of them!—who bought *Neck* were women who identified with her or sensed her identification with them, but certainly many of them were. She had become a model, an ideal, or at the very least, an example—she was telling them things about herself that were also about them, and giving them permission to think these things and feel these things. And she was also telling them what to look out for, what lay ahead. Her honesty and directness, and her unerring prescience, had made her a *figure*— someone whose

influence and authority transcended her individual achievements, extraordinary as they were.

In her later years, her movies brought her tremendous response and reward, both for their quality and because she was the first woman of her time to become a successful commercial film director. How did she do it? By her talent, naturally—her uncanny ability to give us romance as seen through a gimlet eye. Some people complained that her movies were sentimental—those happy endings! But those happy endings were actually realistic: She had lived one herself, through her long third marriage, one of the happiest marriages I've ever witnessed.

The determination and persistence—and clarity—that saw her prevail in Hollywood were the qualities that earlier had propelled her to the heights of journalism, first as a reporter, then as an outspoken commentator. Her abiding principle was the reality principle. And of course she had a not-so-secret weapon: She was funny, even when she was furious; funny through thick and (as we know from *Heartburn*) thin. And she was openly and generously personal without being egotistical. She saw everything wryly, including herself. She also looked great.

This book is structured around the many genres and subjects she explored and conquered. As you'll see, it's autobiographical, sociological, political. It adds up to a portrait of a writer, a log of a writer's career, and an unofficial—and unintended—report on feminism in her time. She's a reporter, a profelist, a polemicist, a novelist, a screenwriter, a playwright, a memoirist, and a (wicked) blogger—blogging came along just in time for her to lash out fiercely at the bad old days of Bush/Cheney. And let's not forget that she was an obsessed foodie. Even her novel has recipes.

What was she like in real life? To begin with, she was a perfect spouse: She and her Nick could have given lessons to that earlier exemplary Nick-and-Nora, the Thin Man and

the Thin Man's lady. She adored her two boys, and nobly tried not to micromanage them. (A real sacrifice: Managing things was one of her supreme talents—and pleasures.) She was a fanatical friend, always there for anyone who needed support, encouragement, or kindness. She was also, I can report, a wonderfully responsive colleague. We worked together on all her books after her first collection, *Wallflower at the Orgy*, without a single moment of contention. As a result, I think I know what she would have wanted this book to be, and her family allowed me to shape it. My immediate reward was having a professional excuse to reread everything she ever wrote. No other editorial job I've ever performed has been so much fun.

A few notes on the text. Since almost all of this material has previously appeared in print but in a variety of venues, we've justified such technical matters as spelling and punctuation. There are some places (surprisingly few, actually) where, over the years, Nora repeated certain stories (sometimes with minor variations) or remade certain points—as in her memories of her early role model, “Jane.” We've left these as they originally appeared so that they can be read in context. The brilliant introduction she wrote for the published version of *When Harry Met Sally ...* originally preceded the text of the script, but now it follows it—I felt it gave away too many of the surprises to come. The recipes—she might not have been pleased—remain untested.

—Robert Gottlieb

* *The Journalist*

Introduction to Wallflower at the Orgy

SOME YEARS AGO, the man I am married to told me he had always had a mad desire to go to an orgy. Why on earth, I asked. Why not, he said. Because, I replied, it would be just like the dances at the YMCA I went to in the seventh grade—only instead of people walking past me and rejecting me, they would be stepping over my naked body and rejecting me. The image made no impression at all on my husband. But it has stayed with me—albeit in another context. Because working as a journalist is exactly like being the wallflower at the orgy. I always seem to find myself at a perfectly wonderful event where everyone else is having a marvelous time, laughing merrily, eating, drinking, having sex in the back room, and I am standing on the side taking notes on it all.

I am not, I must tell you, entirely happy with this role. There are times when I would much prefer to be the one having the fun; there are times when I am seized with an almost uncontrollable desire to blurt out, in the middle of interviews, “*Me! Me! Me!* Enough about *you*. What about *me?*” But then I remember that, like so many journalists, I am stuck on the sidelines not just because I happen to be making a living at the job but because of the kind of person I am and the reason I was drawn to this business.

Everyone I know who writes has an explanation for it, and for years I went around collecting them, hoping that someone else’s reason would turn out to be mine. The first person who gave me what seemed like a good one was a colleague on the *New York Post* (where I worked for five

years), who told me during my first week there that the reason she loved her work was that every day, on the way home from work, she could see people on the subway reading her articles. For four years I looked around the subway to find someone reading mine. No one ever was. And finally, one day, it happened: the man next to me opened to a story of mine, folded the paper carefully back to settle in for a long read, and began. It took him exactly twenty seconds to lose interest, carefully unfold the paper, and turn the page.

Then I remember asking a man who had no real reason for working at a daily newspaper why he was there. "I'll tell you," he said. "I can't think of any place I would rather have been the day the president was killed than in a newspaper office." And that seemed like a wonderful reason—and I thought of the day President Kennedy was shot and the perverse sense of pleasure I got from working under deadline that day, the gratitude for being able to write rather than think about what had happened, the odd illusion of somehow being on top of the situation.

But in the end, the reason I write became quite obvious to me—and it turned out to have much more to do with temperament than motivation. People who are drawn to journalism are usually people who, because of their cynicism or emotional detachment or reserve or whatever, are incapable of being anything but witnesses to events. Something prevents them from becoming involved, committed, and allows them to remain separate. What separates me from what I write about is, I suspect, a sense of the absurd that makes it difficult for me to take many things terribly seriously. I'm not talking about objectivity here (I don't believe in it), nor am I saying that this separateness makes it impossible to write personal journalism. I always have an opinion about the orgy; I'm just not down on the floor with the rest of the bodies.

I feel that I should tell you a little about myself before letting the book begin. I feel this largely because I have just read the introductions to nine other collections of magazine articles, and all of them are filled with juicy little morsels about the people who wrote them. I think, however, that there is quite enough of me in most of these articles for me to forgo telling you how I love eating McIntosh apples and Kraft caramels simultaneously. That kind of thing. I should say that almost everything in this book was written in 1968 and 1969, and almost everything in it is about what I like to think of as frivolous things. Fashion, trashy books, show business, food. I could call these subjects Popular Culture, but I like writing about them so much that I hate to think they have to be justified in this way—or at least I'm sorry if they do.

One night not too long ago I was on a radio show talking about an article I had written for *Esquire* on Helen Gurley Brown [see [here](#)] and I was interrupted by another guest, a folk singer, who had just finished a twenty-five-minute lecture on the need for peace. "I can't believe we're talking about Helen Gurley Brown," he said, "where there's a war going on in Vietnam." Well, I care that there's a war in Indochina, and I demonstrate against it; and I care that there's a women's liberation movement, and I demonstrate for it. But I also go to the movies incessantly, and have my hair done once a week, and cook dinner every night, and spend hours in front of the mirror trying to make my eyes look symmetrical, and I care about those things, too. Much of my life goes irrelevantly on, in spite of larger events. I suppose that has something to do with my hopelessly midcult nature, and something to do with my Hollywood childhood. But all that, as the man said, is a story for another time.

—May 1970

Journalism: A Love Story

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 school 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 Forty-second Street. I told the woman there that I wanted to be a journalist, and she said, "How would you like to work at *Newsweek* magazine?" and 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 *News-week*. 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 responded by saying that 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 a given in those days 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.

I'd found an apartment with a college friend at 110 Sullivan Street, a horrible brand-new white-brick building between Spring and Prince. The rent was \$160 a month, with the first two months free. The real estate broker assured us that the South Village was a coming neighborhood, on the verge of being red-hot. This turned out not to be true for at least twenty years, by which time the area was called SoHo, and I was long gone. Anyway, I packed up a rental car on graduation day and set off to New York. I got lost only once—I had no idea you weren't supposed to take the George Washington Bridge to get to Manhattan. I remember being absolutely terrified when I realized that I was accidentally on the way to New Jersey and might never find a way to make a U-turn; I would drive south forever and never reach the city I'd dreamed of getting back to ever since I was five, when my parents had thoughtlessly forced me to move to California.

When I finally got to Sullivan Street, I discovered that the Festival of St. Anthony was taking place. There was no parking on the block—they were frying zeppole in front of my apartment. I'd never heard of zeppole. I was thrilled. I thought the street fair would be there for months, and I could eat all the cotton candy I'd ever wanted. Of course it was gone the next 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. This was unjust but it was 1962, so it was the way things were.

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, delivering copy back and forth from the writers to the editors, one of whom was named Osborn Elliott, until it was very late. We often worked until three in the morning on Friday nights, and then we 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 truly come to believe that you are living in 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 deliver them to the writers and editors. One night a telex arrived concerning the owner of *Newsweek*, Philip Graham. I had seen Graham on several occasions. He was a tall, handsome guy's guy whose photographs never conveyed his physical attractiveness or masculinity; he would walk through the office, his voice booming, cracking jokes, and smiling a great white toothy grin. 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 crack-up

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 fifties and early sixties; people are always saying “fuck” in them. Trust me, no one threw that word around then the way they do now. I’ll tell you something else: they didn’t drink wine then. Nobody knew about wine. I mean, someone did, obviously, but most people drank hard liquor all the way through dinner. Recently I saw a movie in which people were eating take-out pizza in 1948 and it drove me nuts. There was no take-out pizza in 1948. There was barely any pizza, and barely any takeout. These are some of the things I know, and they’re entirely useless, and take up way too much space in my brain.

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—a library of clippings that was available for research—at *Newsweek*; 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, I read their letters in Kay Graham’s autobiography, and realized that they’d once been in love, but as I went through the clips, I couldn’t imagine it. It seemed clear he was an ambitious young man who’d made a calculated match with a millionaire’s daughter. Now the marriage was falling apart, before my very eyes. It was wildly dramatic, and it 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 departments. 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. But I learned something: I became familiar with every major newspaper in America. I can't quite point out what good that did me, but I'm sure it did some. Years later, when I got involved with a columnist from the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, I at least knew what his newspaper looked like.

Three months later, I was promoted again, this time to the highest rung: I became a researcher. "Researcher" was a fancy word—and not all that fancy at that—for "fact-checker," and that's pretty much what the job consisted of. I worked in the Nation department. I was extremely happy to be there. This was not a bad job six months out of college; what's more, I'd been a political science major, so I was working in a field I knew something about. There were six writers and six researchers in the department, and we worked from Tuesday to Saturday night, when the magazine closed. For most of the week, none of us did anything. The writers waited for files from the reporters in the bureaus, which didn't turn up until Thursday or Friday. Then, on Friday afternoon, they all 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 your job as a researcher was to find out just how many lightbulbs there were. These

tidbits were not so much facts as factoids, but they were the way newsmagazines separated themselves from daily newspapers; the style reached an apotheosis in the work of Theodore H. White, a former *Time* writer, whose *Making of the President* books were filled with information about things like President Kennedy's favorite soup. (Tomato, with a glop of sour cream.) (I ate it for years, as a result.)

At *Newsweek*, 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 having an argument 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, and besides, I was starting to realize that I was probably never going to be promoted to writer at *Newsweek*. And by the way, if I ever had been, I have no reason to think I would have been good at it.

The famous 114-day newspaper strike (which wasn't a strike but a lockout) began in December 1962, and one of its side effects was that several journalists who were locked

out by their newspapers came to *Newsweek* to be writers, temporarily. One of them was Charles Portis, a reporter from the *New York Herald Tribune* whom I went out with for a while, but that's not the point (although it's not entirely beside the point); the point is that Charlie, who was a wonderful writer with a spectacular and entirely eccentric style (he later became a novelist and the author of *True Grit*), was no good at all at writing the formulaic, voiceless, unbylined stories with strict line counts that *Newsweek* printed.

By then I had become friends with Victor Navasky. He was the editor of a satirical magazine called *Monocle*, and it seemed that he knew everyone. He knew important people, and he knew people he made you think were important simply because he knew them. *Monocle* came out only sporadically, but it hosted a lot of parties, and I met people there who became 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 Condé Nast. She was an older woman, about twenty-five, very stylish and sophisticated, and she knew everyone too. She introduced me to my first omelette, 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. I had never heard of the concept of what kind of Jew you were. 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 art and op art. She taught me the difference between Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe. She'd gone out with a number of well-known journalists and writers, and long before I met them I knew,

because of Jane, a number of intimate details about them. Eventually, I went to bed with one of them and that was the end of my friendship with her, but that's getting ahead of things.

One day after the newspaper strike was about a month old, Victor called 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's gossip column in the *New York Post*. I said yes, although I had no idea what to do. I'd met Lyons—he appeared nightly at Sardi's, where my parents often had dinner when they were in New York—but I'd never really focused on his column. I called my friend Marcia, who'd recently babysat Leonard Lyons's son's dogs, and asked her what the deal was with Lyons. She explained to me that the Lyons column was a series of short anecdotes with no point whatsoever. I went upstairs to the morgue at *Newsweek* and read a few weeks' worth of Lyons's columns and wrote the parody. Parodies are very odd things. I've written only about a half dozen of them in my life [see [here](#); [here](#)]; they come on you like the wind, and you write them almost possessed. It's as close as a writer gets to acting—it's 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. Newsstand dealers really didn't understand parodies in those days—this was long before *National Lampoon* and the *Onion*—and most of them sent them back to the distributor. But everyone in the business read them. They were funny. The editors of the *Post* wanted to sue, but the publisher, Dorothy Schiff, said, "Don't be ridiculous. If they can parody the *Post* they can write for it. Hire them." 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*. Of course I was.

I went down to the *Post* offices on West Street a few days later. It was a freezing day in February and I got lost trying to find the entrance to the building, which was actually on Washington Street. 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 a large dusty room 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 as soon as the lockout was over.

There were seven newspapers in New York at that time, and the *Post* was the least of them, circulation-wise. It had always been a liberal paper, and it had had glory days under an editor named James Wechsler, but those days were over. Still, the paper had a solid base of devoted readers. Seven weeks into the lockout, Dorothy Schiff bolted the Publishers Association and reopened the paper, and 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 about the paper. 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. You never used a simple "Who What Where Why When and How" lead in an afternoon 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 from the morgue. Look in the telephone book. Look in the crisscross directory. Call your