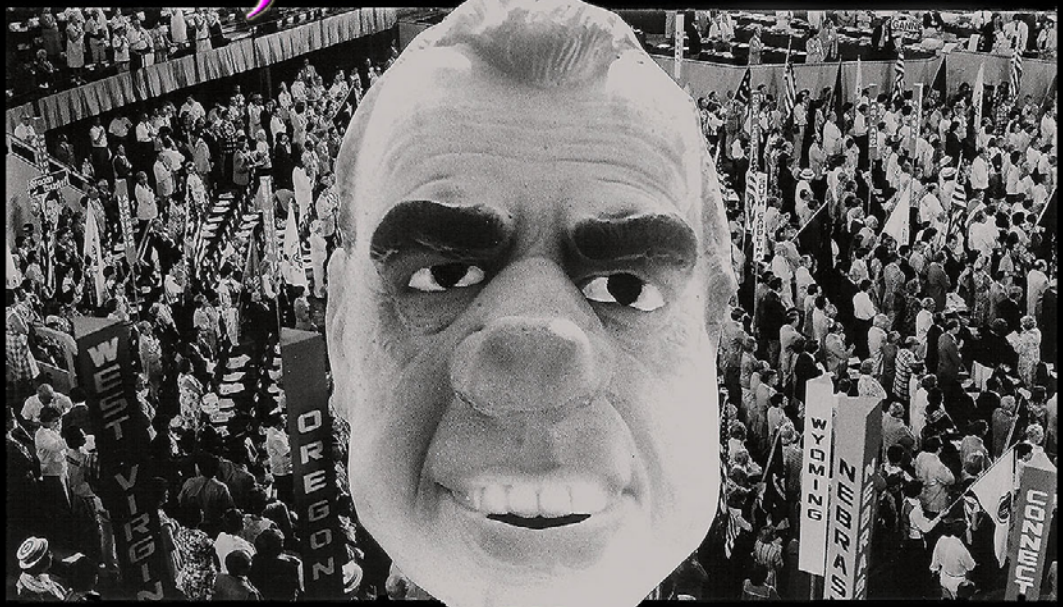
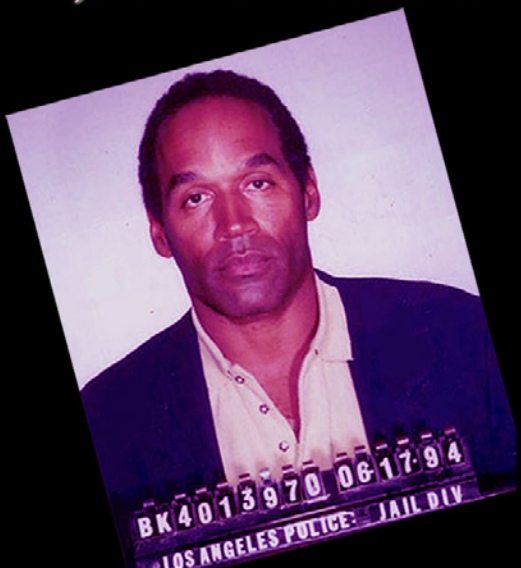
Misadventures in Journalism



BY

H.B. Koplowitz

Journalism ethics & other Oxymorons



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Journalism Ethics & Other Oxymorons

H.B. Koplowitz

Dome Publications

A nonfiction enhanced e-book

Misadventures in Journalism
by H.B. Koplowitz

ISBN 978-0-9791393-3-8

hbkoplowitz.com

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GOP Convention photo by John Barry
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Videos via YouTube

Thanks to
Audrey and Julius,
Matt, Bonnie, Gary,
Bobbi, Jim, Pat and Lori
and everyone at CNS

Preface

Veteran journalist H.B. Koplowitz explores the oxymoron of journalism ethics in this anthology of 19 "stories behind the stories" spanning four decades. In tales that are both engaging and illuminating, Koplowitz recounts some of the big — and not so big — news stories he has covered, revealing some of the ethical choices and mistakes journalists sometimes make under deadline pressure or in hot pursuit of scoops.

Part 1 begins with the author crashing the 1976 Republican National Convention in Kansas City and ends with him sneaking into the 1995 O.J. Simpson trial of the century in Los Angeles. In between, he goes on an ill-fated media junket to interview President Jimmy Carter in Washington, D.C.; walks on fire; stakes out a media stakeout; tries to "seduce" a source; and slips over to the other side to flack for the Illinois State Fair.

Part 2 chronicles some of his experiences editing for a wire service in Los Angeles between 1998 and 2009, when the news business was being buffeted by digitization and tabloidization. Included are stories about Matt Drudge, Meryl Streep, Zsa Zsa Gabor, Paris Hilton, the Columbia space shuttle disaster, a roller coaster death, a terrorist attack at LAX and more.

Misadventures in Journalism is also an enhanced e-book, meaning readers with Internet access should be able to click or tap on blue text (or another color and/or underlined) to view additional content, including public domain video clips on YouTube. Due to disputes among the major e-book distributors, the links will work differently, or not at all, depending on your device, software, and whether you are reading the Nook or Kindle version of the e-book.

To find out more about H.B. Koplowitz and his writings, or to comment on his blog, visit the author's website at hbkoplowitz.com.

Part 1
Making the Sausages

Journalism is like the child's game of Telephone. The rules are simple, the execution hard. You say it here and it comes out there, sort of. News stories are also like proverbial sausages — it is better not to see them being made. Then again, it's good to know what you're eating. The following stories are about making sausages from the point of view of one who has been making them for more than 40 years. One of the first rules of journalism is to consider the source, so here's a little about the sausage maker.

I've been a reporter, freelancer, editor, educator and public information officer in small, medium and big cities. I've also authored three books and ghostwrote a fourth for an Illinois governor who did not go to prison. But a close look at my resume does reveal some gaps.

I was born and raised in the small southern Illinois college town of Carbondale. After graduating from high school in 1969, I briefly attended UCLA before dropping out to protest the war in Vietnam, which in my case meant hitchhiking cross-country and smoking pot. Eventually I limped home and my parents agreed to pay for my education at Southern Illinois University.

It was during the heady post-Watergate days of 1975, and as a 25-year-old college student, I had a promising start in journalism, founding a campus magazine, *nonSequitur*, and becoming student editor of the *Daily Egyptian* campus newspaper. I was even selected outstanding grad by the school's journalism fraternity, to which I did not belong.

My first job out of college was with the *Illinois Times*, an alternative weekly in Springfield, the state capital. I accepted an offer to become a staff writer, but once I'd relocated, the editor said the writing position had been filled, although he had another opening for someone to deliver the newspapers. Occasionally he let me do a story, and I quickly proved the wisdom of his decision to make me a deliveryman. When I wrote about the University of Illinois in Cham-

pagne [*sic*], he said journalism is about precision, and that misspelling Champaign was not just imprecise but embarrassing.

Eventually the editor made me a staff writer, and I did well enough to get hired by my hometown daily newspaper, the *Southern Illinoisan*, first as a feature writer and later as a county beat reporter. My writing was first-rate, but my work habits were slovenly. I wasn't a people person, networker, glad-hander or corporate climber. I was a wannabe syndicated columnist stuck covering school board meetings.

The first time I got in trouble at the *SI*, I was working at the Murphysboro bureau, seven miles from the Carbondale office, and not happy to be covering the Murphysboro Apple Festival at night. After observing the annual apple seed flicking contest, in which kids took apple seeds between their fingers and thumbs and whoever flicked the seeds the farthest won prizes, I went back to the office and wrote a story that began:

"A 15-year-old Murphysboro boy *shot his seed* 16 feet last night, and the Apple Queen was so stunned she fainted. But seriously folks …" I added a couple of carriage returns and then wrote the story straight, saying the teen flicked a seed 16 feet and nobody passed out.

It was pre-Internet days, so I put my hard copy in a basket to be teletyped to Carbondale the next morning by a sweet older woman who for some reason I thought would appreciate my pun. The next day I came straggling in, late as usual, and when I asked her if she liked my little joke, her disconcerting reply was "what joke?"

I immediately called a friend on the desk in Carbondale and told him to delete the bogus story from the computer system and I'd resend a cleaned-up version. I figured nobody would notice, but a few minutes later I got a call from the city editor, who apparently wasn't much of a punster either, because he wanted to know what happened to that story about the Apple Queen fainting. He said he'd pitched the story during the editors' morning meeting and that it was slated for the front page.

While working at the *SI* and living in Buckminster Fuller's geodesic dome home, I wrote and self-published *Carbondale After Dark*, an illustrated anthology of history, essays and short stories about my hometown in the 1960s and '70s. The book was a success, by small-town standards, but it also cost me the coveted Carbondale beat at the

SI. The editor told me there was concern that my book might make me appear biased. In other words, researching and writing about a subject disqualified me from reporting on the same subject. Go figure.

The last time I got in trouble at the *SI*, the editor-in-chief had given me a special assignment to do a "people feature" on a fellow in the rural village of Tamaroa who kept sending letters to the editor complaining about inaccuracies in wire stories the newspaper published about mainland China. He seemed to know the names and titles of Chinese officials better than the Associated Press, and my editor wanted me to find out why.

Turned out the man was retired military intelligence on the China desk and liked keeping track of Chinese affairs as a hobby. "Some people are TV watchers," I wrote. "Others watch birds. Bob Ellis is a China watcher." I went on to tell his story in rich detail, and the next day my editor got a call from the China watcher, who said he really liked the story, only his name was Ellis Melvin.

After getting fired, I latched on to a job as the southern Illinois special correspondent for the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. This was a nifty job, letting me cherry-pick stories rather than covering meetings and festivals. But special correspondent was a euphemism for stringer, which is a journalism term for part-timer, or to be more precise, piecework, as stringers get paid by the story with no benefits. To further impoverish myself, I used my Kaypro computer to create a community gadfly newsletter called the *Carbondale Spectator*, a monthly four-pager in which I took potshots at local shakers and movers.

I did well at the *Post-Dispatch*, but when I asked about applying for a full-time job, I was told the *Post* didn't hire stringers. Since writing for the *Post* turned out to be a detriment to getting hired by the *Post*, in my mid 30s I retreated to grad school at Sangamon State University (now University of Illinois Springfield). Through an influential political friend, I got a summer job as a press officer at the Illinois State Fair, after which I entered SSU's Public Affairs Reporting graduate program and interned as a statehouse reporter for the Springfield *State Journal-Register*, a Copley paper. The internship paid a pittance, which I subsidized by working as the newspaper's night cop reporter on weekends.

After my internship was over, the editor took me out for a bite. I think I flunked lunch when the editor said that if he were to hire me, I'd have to start out like all new reporters, on the police beat, and I pointed out to him that I'd already been working the police beat.

My influential friend then got me a three-month contract with the state, writing press releases for his wife. When I was unable to find newspaper work, I became a full-time public information officer for the Illinois Department of Rehabilitation Services, which funded community services for the disabled. The next thing I knew, eight years had passed by, the prime of my life. It wasn't all bad. I also began teaching English composition at a community college, and in 1990, my friend stepped in again and I was asked to ghostwrite *Illinois State of the State*, a coffee-table book summarizing then-Gov. James R. Thompson's 14-year administration, which he presented to the General Assembly in lieu of his final State of the State speech.

After taking a vacation to California in 1995 that included sneaking into the O.J. Simpson trial, in my 40s I moved to Los Angeles, the city of second chances. A distant relation got me a temporary job at the American Film Institute, and I began writing a column about the Internet and pop culture for a weekly called *Entertainment Today*. I had finally fulfilled my dream of becoming a weekly columnist, even if I was getting paid only $15 a story.

Next I got a job teaching journalism at a college in South-Central Los Angeles, becoming faculty adviser to the student newspaper, which became the subject of my second book, *Blackspanic College*. And I became a copy editor at the legendary City News Service in Los Angeles, where I worked for 15 years, on and off. Under the tutelage of then-editor Pat Teague, the human journalism machine, I finally began to understand what my first editor meant by "precision," and just how difficult that can be.

CNS was a 24/7 pressure cooker, and at some point during my tenure there I became more accepting of my own imperfections, as well as those of my peers. Journalism is hard, and everyone makes mistakes. But I remain fascinated by the vagaries of the profession, and at various times I've written about my experiences in a style that was once called gonzo or New Journalism.

Part 1 begins with me crashing the 1976 Republican National

Convention in Kansas City, and ends with me crashing the O.J. Simpson trial of the century in 1995. Part 2 is about my journalism experiences in Los Angeles. The stories cover various subjects, but in one way or another, they all examine the oxymoron of "journalism ethics."

1976
The Rubbish and the Rubies

In 1976, the Republican Party was at a familiar crossroads. Two years earlier, Richard Nixon had resigned in disgrace over the Watergate scandal, and a relatively moderate Republican congressman from Michigan, Gerald Ford, had tripped into the presidency, having been appointed vice president after Spiro Agnew copped a plea to tax evasion. The unelected incumbent was fending off a determined bid for the Republican presidential nomination by a charismatic former actor and California governor named Ronald Reagan, who had become the darling of what was then known as the Goldwater wing of the GOP and today would be called the Tea Party.

Reagan had the backing of unreconstructed Sen. Jesse Helms of North Carolina; nemesis of the Equal Rights Amendment for women Phyllis Schlafly; and evangelical mass-mail marketing maven Richard Viguerie. But Ford had his own crafty team of advisers, including campaign manager and then-Undersecretary of Commerce Jim Baker, then-Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld; and then-White House Chief of Staff Dick Cheney.

By the end of the primaries, Ford had won the popular vote by 53 percent to 46 percent and had slightly more delegates than Reagan, but not enough to seal the deal. So both candidates went to the convention early to woo about 150 uncommitted delegates — mostly elected and appointed party officials not bound by the outcomes of primaries and caucuses. Ford was accused of using the power of the incumbency to trade pork barrel projects for votes, along with trips on Air Force One, meetings in the Oval Office and invitations to state dinners. But if Reagan could pick off enough true believers to stop Ford from winning the nomination on the first ballot, all the delegates would be free to change their votes, and it was believed that many of them wanted to vote for Reagan.

It may have been the last contested political convention in American history, but at the time, I was a surly journalism student at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale and couldn't have cared less. Ford was right, Reagan was way right, and I was way left. But on a

lark, a photographer friend, my girlfriend and I decided to crash the Republican National Convention in Kansas City. We arrived without credentials, but infiltrated the proceedings in ways that are probably impossible in a post-9/11 world. Looking for an angle that wasn't being covered by anyone else, I focused on the role young people played in the process. I questioned whether party conventions were an appropriate venue for choosing presidential candidates, and I was surprised by my own conclusion.

'Presidential' Reception

Typically ass-backwards, we split for the 1976 Republican National Convention in Kansas City, not knowing what we were looking for or what we would find. There were three of us: John Barry, the photographer; Debra Storhaug, the observer; and me, the scribe. We were armed with two flimsy angles to get from the outside of spectators and hangers-on to the inner circles of high political intrigue. One was the name of an up-and-coming politico from the central Illinois town of Lincoln, who we hoped would escort us behind the scenes. The other was a recently expired press card from the *Daily Egyptian*, SIU's student newspaper. I had belatedly written off for press credentials and been refused, and we had been unable to reach our contact. We might have tried to reach him by cell phone, text, email or Facebook, except none of those options existed. We were going in blind.

My folks let me borrow their Buick, and Deb's parents allowed us to stay at their home in nearby Overland Park, Kansas, so we had transportation and a place to crash when we awoke Sunday morning to the *Kansas City Star* newspaper, which had a schedule of events. The convention at Kemper Arena wouldn't start until Monday, but President Ford was due to arrive at his temporary residence, the Crown Center Hotel, at 5 p.m. Our contact was also staying at the Crown, so we decided to break the ice in K.C. with a presidential reception.

The Hallmark greeting cards-owned Crown Center was crawling with every sort of cop, from Secret Service to Pinkertons. The

lobby was full of delegates, spectators, TV cameras, campaign workers and hundreds of cheering young people. There was a bar in the lobby, and not to our surprise we found our contact at the watering hole. His name was Scott Warner, and at 23 years old, he said he was the youngest Republican officeholder in the nation. Warner was a city alderman in Lincoln, a town of 15,000, and hoped to be its next mayor. He was at the convention with his boss, John Gehlbach, a Lincoln attorney in his 50s who walked around the lobby of the Crown with a silver presidential pin in his lapel that signified he had made a $1,000 donation to the Ford campaign.

Warner was also hanging out with Clark Horvath, who worked for the Ford campaign out of Washington, D.C. He also wore a silver pin, along with a red glass dot on the identification card hung around his neck, which gave him access to the top two floors of the hotel, where the White House staff was holed up.

More people were crowding into the Crown lobby, and Warner was buying us drinks on what he said was the president's expense account. We were joined by some other friends of Warner's who all seemed to be officers in an organization called Youth of Illinois for Ford, as well as the Young Republicans.

A band began to steam up the crowd with a rousing rendition of "Jumping Jack Flash," a Rolling Stones number that did not seem very Republican, or presidential. But presidential had a second meaning. Horvath pointed at the hundreds of frenzied young people with "homemade" signs who were incessantly cheering and chanting Ford slogans. "Looks spontaneous, don't it?" he said. "Those are the Presidentials."

Over gin and tonics, Horvath revealed that he coordinated the campaign activities of Ford's son Jack, who was the titular head of the Presidentials, a newly created network of some 1,500 Ford supporters, ages 16 to 24, many of whom had come at their own expense to Kansas City. In other words, Horvath was partly responsible for the racket in the lobby, and he had come to see his handiwork. He said Ford had the highest popularity among young people of any Republican president since Lincoln, and that much of that popularity was because of his family. "The problem is getting young people to vote," he added.

Horvath said that while they were in Kansas City, the Presidentials would get a political education with workshops, seminars and visits by Cabinet officers. But it was clear their primary function was to ensure there were enthusiastic crowds at airports, hotels, the convention center and anywhere else Ford appeared, and that the primary function of "Jumping Jack Flash" was to keep them riled up.

A stir went through the lobby as Vice President Nelson Rockefeller was ushered through by the Secret Service. The Presidentials went wild with chants of "We want Rocky," even though he would not be Ford's running mate, having been tossed off the ticket in an attempt to placate the right wing. Spirits continued to be deposited in bladders and tongues began to wag.

One of Warner's friends took me aside and earnestly tried to convince me that "Jimmy Carter is a hawk. I just have this real strong feeling that he will get us into another war." Peering into my Semitic eyes, he added, "in the Middle East."

Horvath rolled his eyes. "Let's not forget why we're all here," he chided. "We're all professional hand-clappers."

Finally, President Ford and his family arrived to a flood of hot TV lights and thundering ovations. The president introduced his family, gave a mini-speech and within 10 minutes it was over. Time to head upstairs to Horvath's room and do some more drinking.

About a dozen of us crowded into Horvath's small suite, which quickly filled with cigarette smoke and trash talk. On a table was a portable bar that folded into a briefcase. "Don't drink my Early Times," the owner shouted from the bathroom. I jiggled my ice cubes and attempted to continue interviewing.

"How come you became a Republican?" I asked Warner. "Because 80 percent of my county is Republican," he answered, paused, and as an afterthought added, "and I agree with the philosophy of the Republican Party."

Warner's sugar daddy Gehlbach made some cheap ethnic jokes and Warner negotiated dinner with Deb. I turned to the other officers in the Illinois Young Republicans, but found little of news value. It was rapidly becoming clear that if there was a head honcho, it was Horvath. Warner was trying to latch onto Horvath's karma, and the rest of the Young Republicans were hanging on to the hanger-on, and

there I was, interviewing a hanger-on of a hanger-on.

Horvath came to my rescue, offering to take me along as he checked on the Presidentials, who were headquartered in a reconverted airplane hangar across the Missouri River. At the hangar, Rick Bannerman, operations manager for the Presidentials, said he was "busier than a one-legged man in a shit-kicking factory." His job was getting the young people on buses to go cheer.

The Presidentials supported Ford, but the few I talked to were more interested in partying than politicking. As one Illinois Presidential put it, "Where's the beer?" To see the political stars, the price of admission was to chant slogans and cheer, and that they would do with gusto.

Ron-ald Ray-gun

Sometime during Sunday's inebriation, Horvath had told us where to go to try to get limited access press credentials — 3-inch-by-5-inch cards that if worn around the neck would give us access to media events, but not the convention itself. We went to the Municipal Auditorium, which housed the RNC Headquarters as well as the media headquarters. The assistant supervisor in charge of issuing college media credentials told us that without prior reservations, there was nothing he could do.

Bravely I showed him my recently expired *Daily Egyptian* press card and hoped for the best. Not exactly the *Washington Post*, but what the heck. Fate was on our side. The assistant happened to be Arabic, and when he saw the word "Egyptian" he became sympathetic. In a thick Middle Eastern accent he said he was slightly familiar with SIU through a friend who was once in its Arabic Studies Program, and it was enough to get us credentials.

Next stop was a reception hosted by the Presidentials for young delegates and alternates. The scene was punch and cookies and the entertainment was Tony Orlando sans Dawn. Seeking a "local angle," I looked for Illinois delegates, who weren't hard to find, because everyone was wearing ID tags with name, rank and state on them.

Soon I was talking with R.D. Cunningham, 25, of Lawrenceville.

"I walk around, go to parties and look important," he told me. Career objective: "I want to be president." As to why he was a Republican: "Because if I wasn't, my dad (state Rep. Roscoe Cunningham) would cut off my milk fund."

Next I found a recent SIU grad, 21-year-old Glen Falck of suburban Chicago, who was a Presidential. Hardly a hippie, he still had the longest hair in the place. We sat down on the floor against a wall and I began interviewing.

Falck said he'd come to K.C. more out of curiosity than commitment. A Chicago precinct worker owed him a favor, he said, so his trip was all expenses paid. As I suspected, he said the Presidentials weren't getting many briefings from high level government officials. "All we do is sit around waiting to go somewhere and yell."

He said the Presidentials were "sheep, used to seal gaps and fill up places, and to yell themselves hoarse," and that he was amazed so many of them could be manipulated like that and not realize it. But he added that chanting "we want Ford" had a "magical meter to it, which actually produced a mild euphoria," and that it was "infectious" — he sometimes found himself chanting without knowing why. He said it seemed like fun and games, but dictators and military juntas have also come to power by planting people in crowds, "where someone yells something, and soon the crowd eagerly takes up the slogan or chant."

Deb, John and I slipped away to the Hilton Plaza, where most of the Illinois delegates were staying, and where Reagan was to put in an appearance around 4 p.m. While waiting, we came across a delegate from Carbondale, Mrs. Rose Vieth, who was a diehard Reagan supporter.

Ford had slightly more delegates, but Reagan was tantalizingly close, and in a "game-change" effort to sway undecideds who weren't committed to either delegate, he announced that if he were nominated, he would select relatively liberal Pennsylvania Sen. Richard Schweiker to be his running mate. The move backfired, as moderates were unimpressed, while conservatives were annoyed. In what became known as the misery-loves-company strategy, the Reaganites wanted Ford to announce his running mate before the vote on the nomination. A procedural vote on that issue, scheduled for the next

day, would signal which candidate had enough delegates to secure the nomination.

The media were reporting that Reagan would lose, but Vieth was still optimistic. "Anyone who thinks they can call it at this point is a fool," she said. On another subject, she told us that all the delegates had a ticket to the convention plus a guest ticket, and that each state delegation also had single-night tickets set aside for guests, which she suggested we sign up for.

The room where Reagan was to appear was filling up with people. It wasn't a particularly big room, and it was made smaller by roped-off areas in front of the stage and risers in the rear where the behemoths of the media, the TV cameras, were poised. Much of the rest of the space was taken up by lesser representatives of the media and Reagan's version of the Presidentials, a bunch of teenage hand-clappers called Youth for Reagan. There were fewer of them and they seemed to be even younger than the Presidentials, but they made up for their lower numbers with higher decibels of enthusiasm.

The room quickly became hot, crammed and stuffy. There was a lot of jostling and tempers were short. Some guy in a baby blue cowboy leisure suit with white rhinestones was warming up the crowd with boasts that as head of the Screen Actors Guild, Reagan had acquired first-hand knowledge of foreign affairs by "fighting the Communists in Hollywood."

The Youth for Reagan ecstatically waved their signs and syncopated "R-R-R-E-A, R-E-A-G-A-N, *Ron*-ald *Ray*-gun!" But that singularly vulgar remark, dredging up and even bragging about the McCarthy era, the Red Scare and the blacklisting of left-leaning writers, artists and entertainers, revealed a lot more about Reagan than his Pepsodent smile, Knute Rockne hair and "liberal" running mate. Certainly there were many Reagan supporters, like Vieth, who simply agreed with his conservative values. But the core of his support came from the anti-people — anti-abortion, anti-gay, anti-immigrant, anti-equality, anti-science and anti-sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll.

Some Hollywood lightweights like Efrem Zimbalist Jr. said some words, then Schweiker and Reagan made an appearance to shouts of "We want Reagan" and "We like Schweik." The speeches were of the "go team go" variety — no substance, no revelations. The entire pro-

duction was meant for the TV cameras, and if a glimpse of Reagan and Schweiker wasn't enough to get your rocks off, it left a foul taste in the mouth.

Convention Ho

To save time, on Tuesday, I was dropped off at the Crown Plaza to see if the Illinois delegation would provide us with guest tickets, while Deb and John went back to the media headquarters to get a schedule. The funniest thing happened on my way to the Illinois delegation. I ran into Ronald Reagan again. And just about the time Reagan came out, President Ford went into the Illinois caucus. At the end of the caucus, like a small town revival, several officially uncommitted (unofficially committed) delegates testified they had seen the light and came out for Ford or Reagan. I finally got to check on our tickets, and the Illinois delegation had come through. We were going to that night's convention session.

With some time to kill, we headed over to Yippie Park, a hillside at the World War I Memorial that had been set aside for protesters. There was a small contingent of Yippies, while the majority of dissidents appeared to be gay. All told there were fewer than 50 hardcore, including the band. Things were so docile the police weren't even around.

It was getting late in the afternoon. The Yippies finished their signs and climbed into their beat-up vans and jalopies and headed to Kemper Arena, where they would stand behind a double-high chain-link fence and keep up a steady stream of anti-establishment racket. We changed out of our T-shirts and back into our suits, climbed back into my folks' borrowed Buick and clutched our convention tickets, which would put us in touch with another kind of racket.

The atmosphere inside the arena was like a major sporting event. We felt awe looking at the convention floor, like seeing the field when you enter a baseball stadium. Almost as exciting as spotting the politicians was picking out the big-shot TV reporters through our binoculars. The anchor booths for the three networks were ensconced in glass-enclosed luxury boxes on the mezzanine level. It was grat-

ifying to watch David Brinkley blow his nose or Walter Cronkite wipe sweat off his brow after the TV cameras had been catching the delegates in inelegant poses the night before.

Like at some sporting events, the best seats were in front of the TV, not in the bleachers. Through our binoculars we could see everything, but couldn't tell what was going on. When they began the pivotal roll-call vote on 16-C — whether Ford would have to name his running mate — there wasn't even a scoreboard to show the vote.

From our vantage point in the bleachers, the delegates on the floor looked like a bunch of ants swarming around. Over at the New York delegation, we could see a tipsy Nelson Rockefeller waving a broken telephone. Another clump was forming around the nearby Mississippi delegation, where Mike Wallace was getting the scoop. What we didn't know was that some of the Mississippi delegates were so disappointed with Reagan for picking a liberal running mate that they were switching their support to Ford. The motion was defeated, signaling the president had enough delegates to win the nomination.

Deb spotted Warner standing next to Wallace, eavesdropping on news in the making. When he returned upstairs, John took off after him, looking for a chance to get that perfect image. Warner let him borrow a delegate's floor pass that he had borrowed, but I stayed put, collecting random impressions and getting more melancholy by the moment.

I had come so far, to K.C. and inside the arena. I should not stop there. I should chase after John and practice my craft, buttonhole somebody on the floor and ask some inane question. Suddenly Deb spotted John through the binoculars, buzzing around on the floor like a honeybee, collecting pollen with his camera.

The honeybee had communed with the ants. I, too, should join them in the holy act of news-making. But I was not in a honeybee mood. To extend the swollen metaphor, I felt like a praying mantis, a cannibalistic journalist.

How could a decision like who should run for president be made at a circus like this? No! It had to be hype. A facade. The hugest pseudo-event of them all. Everyone, all the reporters, politicians, police, protesters and hand-clappers, merely reinforced the charade. And to hell if I would lend my credibility to this sham by participating in it.

Courageously I clung to my pillar of sarcasm and my bleacher seat. The hell if I would lower myself to become a media groupie.

War of the Screamers

Despite my cynicism, by Wednesday morning we were all hooked on the convention and wanted to be back inside the arena that night, when the delegates would vote on the nominee. Getting tickets became our primary objective, but unfortunately, everyone else felt the same way. At the Illinois delegation, the list was discarded and instead a raffle was held to determine who got the 25 tickets 300 people wanted. After we lost the raffle, we went to the California courtesy room, located next to the Illinois room, where there was free fruit and a pay bar.

The network news was on TV, and several sullen Reagan supporters had gathered around. Cronkite reported that after the effort to force Ford to name his running mate failed, Schweiker had offered to withdraw from the ticket, but Reagan had stood by his man. One of the Reagan supporters wondered aloud why their candidate didn't accept Schweiker's resignation, looked around and apologetically added, "I guess I'm not supposed to say that."

No one said anything, but it was clear they agreed. The bold Schweiker move by Reagan campaign manager John Sears had been a clever gambit but a fatal political blunder. The move may have hurt Reagan, but it was probably for the good of the party and the nation. Reagan personified the backlash from the hippie generation — parents like mine who felt they were losing their children to drugs, cults or social movements. People who resented being told they were wrong on civil rights and Vietnam, and longed to return to the WASPy values of the 1950s.

The fanaticism of their support was reflected in the passion of their screams. Sure, the Reaganites yelled louder because they were behind, but there was also a disconcerting messianism to their fervor. The intensity of the Reagan supporters, especially the Youth for Reagan, gave his campaign a fascist undercurrent.

It would be sympathetic, and probably inaccurate, to suggest that

Sears saw the extremist drift of the Reagan faction, and for ethical reasons sought to divert it by balancing the ticket with a liberal. More likely, he realized that a minority of fanatical support was inferior to a majority of lukewarm support, and he attempted a last-ditch effort to align the right with the left to head off the middle. But his strategy was doomed for the same reason leftist activists have been unsuccessful this election cycle — a non-polarized society in which the majority of people are in the middle. The result has been the selection of moderates in both parties. Neither Jimmy Carter nor Gerald Ford could be seen as "cause" candidates.

Before heading back to Deb's parents' house to watch the convention on TV, we saw a gaggle of Youth for Reagan boarding buses to head to the arena. They were armed with the usual signs and silly hats, plus a new weapon — large plastic horns. In the war of the screamers, the Reaganites were launching an escalation.

As we watched from the safety of home, the Reagan people did not wait long to deploy their horns. At the first mention of their candidate during the nomination speeches, a desperate 45-minute demonstration erupted that not even three renditions of "God Bless America" could abate. In terms of tumult, the plastic horns far exceeded anything that had come before, though toward the end of the demonstration, the out-of-breath horn-blowers began to sound like dying cows, or as one observer noted, "dying elephants."

The Ford faction trumped the plastic horn ploy with air horns. So while the Reaganites had to huff and puff to keep their horns filibustering, the Ford people simply uncorked their air horns to sustain 20 minutes of uninterrupted interruption.

Absurd American Way

Over the course of the week we had been immersed in the Republican universe and had even started to think a little like Republicans. Evil old Reagan had become a sentimental friend, if not favorite, and Ford a moderate, level-headed conservative who had managed to delay the inevitable drift of the GOP to the far right.

It was therefore a somewhat shattering experience when we turned on the tube Thursday morning and discovered Ford had

decided to play politics as usual by selecting Kansas Sen. Robert Dole as his running mate. About the only good thing about Dole, a youthful Ford campaign worker told me, was that nobody knew who he was. "That will make it easier to market an image of him."

The soaps jammed the airwaves, so we headed back to the city. John's search for the perfect image had come down to the final day of the convention, and it was imperative that we find a way back into the arena to see Ford give his acceptance speech. John and Deb theorized the dejected Reaganites might not use all their passes, so we headed to Alameda Plaza, Reaganland, where hopefully there would be some sore losers and spare tickets.

Deb stayed to keep an eye on the situation, while John and I headed one more time to the Presidentials' headquarters at the airplane hangar, where Secretary of State Henry Kissinger was to put in an appearance and open himself up to questions from the young people.

The first questioner wanted Kissinger's reaction to breaking news — in what became known as the tree-trimming incident, two U.S. soldiers who were part of a team to trim a poplar tree in the DMZ, or demilitarized zone between North and South Korea, had just been axed to death by North Korean soldiers. Kissinger called the massacre "premeditated murder," which for some reason the audience responded to with applause that out of habit was in unison.

The next question was from a young lady who wanted to know if she could kiss the secretary of state. Kissinger acquiesced, to cheers and shouts of "Oh, Henry!"

Next, Kissinger was asked about apartheid in South Africa. He said he wanted to see a negotiated transition to majority rule, but that time was running out for avoiding a race war because "communists" wanted armed struggle and "the radicalization of the African continent." He also said Congress' rejection of Ford's request to arm anti-Marxist guerrillas in Angola had encouraged and increased Cuban and Russian influence in Africa.

It was vintage Kissinger, concerned more about the balance of superpowers than human rights or peace. Yet he was too moderate for the Republican right wing because he was tied to the strategy of détente with the Soviet Union, rapprochement with China and

to Nixon, whose disgraced visage hung over the convention like a shroud. The Nobel Peace Prize winner had become a political liability, so instead of stumping with the president, he had been dispatched to pacify the Presidentials.

Back to Alameda Plaza, where Deb was staying on top of the ticket situation. She had determined our best hope was to throw in with the Youth for Reagan, who had devised a technique they called "scrounging." About 50 of us climbed on a bus and headed to the arena with 15 tickets. The ones who got the tickets were to head into the arena and scrounge tickets from people already inside who had extras.

One of the leaders of the Youth for Reagan strolled down the bus. "California residents get first dibs," he said. After he had dispensed about a dozen tickets, Deb got his attention by asking if all the Californians had gotten their tickets, honeysuckle hanging from every syllable.

"I'm trying," he answered, as he delivered a precious ticket into her tender grasp.

When we got to the arena, John used the ticket. Once inside, he approached alternate delegates, and inside a half-hour he had secured two more tickets. Meanwhile, Deb had scored two more tickets from the Youth for Reagan. Since we had beat the system, we gave them to fellow scroungers. We'd made it to the finale.

The crowd was electric, the aisles jammed with Ford supporters. Actor Cary Grant was at the podium, rambling about how wonderful women were and how much he loved them. He introduced a weaving Betty Ford, who floated out long enough to wave and exit stage left without a word. The lights dimmed, the crowd hushed, and what followed was a slick home movie of the first family.

Then Ford came out and delivered his tepid acceptance speech. Out came Betty again, son Jack and the rest of the first family, Dole, Rocky, some cabinet members, then Ronald Reagan, who gave an impromptu speech that was meant to show Republican unity but seemed to give the delegates buyer's remorse. The joint was a madhouse, one last orgasmic gush of cheering, twirling signs, party hats, balloons and cathartic outbursts of conditioned response. What malarkey, I again thought from my perch in the peanut gallery. What

artifice. What a mockery of democracy.

But as the meaningless noise continued, I thought about how so many other nations choose their leaders. Instead of battling with hand-clappers and pseudo-events, they use guns and grenades to solve their political differences. If America can sublimate its political energy through pep rallies instead of riots, balloons instead of bombs and party hats instead of military juntas, then more power to the absurd American way.

Crystal in the Debris

The convention was over, the politicians and delegates had left the arena. From behind his glass booth, Cronkite sipped beer from a plastic cup, while the network floor reporters huddled for their post-convention recaps. We wandered among the rubbish and the rubies, looking for one last crystal in the debris.

The Roger Mudds and Sam Donaldsons looked mellowed out. "Cassie's (Mackin) down for the eight count," laughed Tom Brokaw. Morton Dean thought it was "a hell of a convention," and even seasoned John Chancellor walked out on the floor looking dazed.

Some cops were off to the side using their riot clubs to play volleyball with a balloon. The cheering became an echo, and ghosts from the '60s took up their own chants: power to the people … Ho Ho Ho Chi Minh … the whole world is watching.

Was there really that much difference between the stoned freaks of a decade ago and the Republicans of today? At the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago, many of the protesters had been manipulated by the Yippies the same as the teenage Presidentials and Youth for Reagan were used by the Republicans. Only instead of confetti, it was baggies full of shit they were instructed to hurl.

Still, it was for a cause, like peace, equality, and liberation, rather than a milksop candidate like Gerald Ford. But drop the romanticism, Mac. The good guys seldom win, and the world isn't always a choice between good and evil. Usually it's a choice of lesser evils.

Maybe we can live in a polarized world with choices like Nixon or McGovern, or a boring world where the choice is Ford or Carter. The former is more exciting, the latter safer. There is more to gain

in a polarized society, but also a lot to lose. And considering the batting average of the good guys, maybe this was one season we could take solace in the fact that there wasn't a dime's worth of difference between the candidates.

1977

The Great Washington, D.C., Fiasco

In 1977, a group of Illinois journalism students who thought they were going to meet with President Jimmy Carter went on an ill-fated media junket to the nation's capital. We didn't see the president, but I didn't let the facts get in the way of a good story.

Imagine you had a chance to ask one question, face-to-face, with the president of the United States. That's just the opportunity a group of Illinois journalism students thought they had as a result of a chain of events that resulted in the Great Washington, D.C., Fiasco.

Shortly after Jimmy Carter's inauguration in January 1977, a journalism student from Bradley University in Peoria, George Sloan, wrote the White House requesting an interview with the new chief executive. He received a congenial reply signed by Press Secretary Jody Powell saying the president did not grant one-on-one interviews. Sloan wrote Powell back and suggested that if Carter did not give individual interviews, perhaps he would meet with a group of journalism students representing college newspapers from throughout Illinois. Several weeks later, Powell wrote back saying the president would consider meeting with such a group, and Sloan began contacting other schools, including Southern Illinois University.

In late March I got a call from Jim Santori, my co-editor at *non-Sequitur*, the campus magazine I'd started. He said if I wanted to see the president I needed to fill out a form for the Secret Service. Jim was calling from the SIU *Daily Egyptian*, which was abuzz with speculation about the trip.

I was in my last semester and skeptical that anyone from SIU, much less *nonSequitur*, was being invited to attend a press conference with President Carter. After a respectable amount of time so as not to appear curious, I strolled into the newsroom and tried to get to the bottom of things. If it were any other president, the idea would have been absurd. But Carter's "open administration" made it seem remotely possible. And even if the odds were a thousand to one, how could I pass up an outside chance to get a fluke interview with The

Most Powerful Man On Earth? So I filled out a form for the Secret Service.

More letters were exchanged between Sloan and the president's press secretary, and about 50 journalism students from about 10 Illinois schools signed up for the "junket," which was find your own transportation and pay your own expenses. As the day of the press conference, May 19, 1977, approached, the group of 50 had dwindled down to about 20 diehards, half of whom were from SIU. The cracks began appearing in the dike after we arrived in Washington. The day before the press conference, Sloan told us that instead of going to the White House, we would be ensconced next door in the Executive Office Building and subjected to a procession of cabinet deputy undersecretaries and political functionaries.

Sloan said Carter was "iffy," but Press Secretary Jody Powell was "probable." It became official on the day of the big fiasco when we were ushered into a room in the EOB that epitomizes broken promises — the Indian Treaty Room. With a secret smile indicating some sort of Washington in-joke, our minder, Deputy Presidential Press Secretary Jim Perks, told us no Indian treaties had ever been signed there. He also made it plain we would not be meeting POTUS. But he said you never could tell when Jody might suddenly pop through the door, speed-rapping and chain smoking, as if Powell really were the mischievous imp the mainstream media portrayed him to be.

So the ground rules had changed from what do you ask the president to what do you ask Bob Howell of the Justice Department, or Robert Barry from the Office of Soviet Affairs at State. It's not that we were unappreciative or that the speakers weren't knowledgeable, but without some recognizable name to quote, there was no way any of us was going to end up with a very interesting story.

By mid-afternoon we were getting pretty fed up. We had sat through five lengthy but unproductive presentations already, and in what seemed like a fit of petulance, the Republican National Committee had dispatched what looked to be a 16-year-old Young Republican to practice his rap on us. I was blowing lazy smoke rings at the ceiling and wondering whether anyone would mind if I put my feet up on the historic Indian Treaty Room conference table when I decided it was time to take matters into my own hands. I'd call Jody

Powell's office and tell somebody off.

The press secretary's secretary told me Powell was unavailable and was about to hang up when I went into my sob story. "Please," I began, "you may not be aware, but there's a contingent of college journalism students next door who have come all the way from Illinois at their own expense because your office told them they had been granted an interview with the president of the United States. I realize the president is a very busy man, but what about the vice president? Or anyone we've heard of."

The secretary said she would see what she could do and put me on hold. Several minutes later she told me there just wasn't anyone around.

"Let me put this another way," I said. "So far, the only story we have is that the Carter administration broke a promise to meet with a group of student journalists from Illinois. What if the White House Press Corps got ahold of this? They'd eat you for breakfast in Peoria."

Instead of putting me on hold, this time the secretary put her palm over the phone. I could hear her talking to someone and then what sounded like a muffled, baritone, "aargh."

"You're in luck," the secretary told me. "Jody unexpectedly came into the office, and he says he'd be happy to drop by for a few minutes."

We were prepared to be hostile, but when the press secretary entered the room and deadpanned, "Hi, I'm Jody Powell and you're not," we were like mush in his hands. One of the first questions we asked was what he thought of the media's coverage of the president.

"The White House Press Corps are a bunch of buffoons," Powell cracked. "Though it's not entirely their fault. The several hundred accredited reporters who shadow the president are under incredible pressure to beat each other out on stories. But they usually end up with the same information at the same time, which is merely the official version or what I choose to tell them. So even though the White House beat is at the top of the news profession, it's really a crummy job."

Powell paused, then shrugged his light brown hair off his forehead. "God, I wish there was something I wanted from those guys,"

he chortled. “I mean, every one of those bozos would give their left nut to get on my good side, not to mention the lady reporters,” he winked. “Just to get that leak a few minutes sooner. For a little extra access or an extra juicy quote.”

“Are they objective?” Powell repeated the follow-up question. “Let me put it this way: every one of the reporters who covered the candidates during last year’s primaries thought that if their guy got elected, they would become the next White House correspondent for their network or newspaper. No wonder Frank Reynolds cried when Reagan lost the nomination in Kansas City.”

When someone asked about ABC White House correspondent Sam Donaldson, Powell’s eyes flashed. “He’s like a mad dog with a bone,” he drawled. “Off the record, I think Sam’s got a terminal case of Plains Fever from eating too many free peanuts and having too many beers with brother Billy.

“Sam has a great sense for the absurd, and Plains was perfect for him,” he teased. “ABC should assign him there forever. But I don’t think he’ll ever forgive the president for being from the South when the other reporters got to cover their candidates in Los Angeles or New York. But that’s just one of those things I gotta put up with.”

When asked about criticism that Carter pollster Pat Caddell had recommended the president continue to promote “style over substance,” Powell didn’t back down. “That’s just hardcore political reality,” he said. “Heck, when Eric Sevareid does it they call it ‘analysis.’ But when we do the same thing they call it ‘manipulative’ and ‘cynical.’ Crap. Most of those White House reporters wouldn’t know substance if they stepped in a pile of it anyway.”

I watched my smoke ring disintegrate as it lazily floated toward the ceiling. The 16-year-old Young Republican was still droning on about how the GOP was going to appeal to blacks and young people Alas, there was no telephone call, no conversation and no appearance by Jody Powell. Only the figments of my bored imagination. But let that be a lesson to all you Jody Powells. In this enlightened age of gonzo and New Journalism, if you aren’t going to give us the news so we can inform the people, then by golly we’ll make it up so at least to entertain them.

1984

Firewalking for Dumbos

Aided and abetted by credulous media, motivational speakers such as Tony Robbins have been fleecing the rubes for decades with so-called firewalking workshops. When the craze began in the 1980s, I could have used some motivation, having been fired by the Southern Illinoisan *and reduced to freelancing for its free entertainment weekly. For one of my first stories, I decided to write about firewalking, and as fate would have it, so did a staff reporter for the* SI. *We came away with different impressions.*

Remember the delightful Walt Disney tale about Dumbo, the baby elephant with big floppy ears who learned how to fly with the aid of a magic feather given to him by a crow? It was the aerodynamic shape of Dumbo's ears that gave him the ability to fly. But it took what doctors call the placebo effect — an ordinary feather that Dumbo believed was magic — for him to get up the courage to spread his ears and soar.

For a hundred bucks a crack, local residents are being asked to behave like Dumbos. They are being told that by going through something called a firewalking workshop, they can "discover the limitless power of human potential and possibilities." The magic feather they are being asked to cling to is a belief in mind over matter. They are being told that by controlling their fears and harnessing their psychic powers, they can do just about anything, from coping with test anxiety to fighting off cancer.

As proof that they, too, can be taught how to master these miraculous mental forces, participants are guaranteed that after the workshop they will be able to walk over a bed of hot coals unscathed. But firewalking has little to do with mind over matter. Rather, it is an example of what the professional magician and debunker James Randi, whose stage name is The Amazing Randi, calls a non-intuitive experience. Amazing as it seems, you don't have to be a magician, or even a positive thinker, to take a few quick steps over a tamped down simmering wood fire and not get burned. Take it from a skeptic

who has.

The crow in this case was Ron Edwards, a 43-year-old cosmetologist and part-time firewalking instructor who lived in the small southern Illinois town of Johnston City. Not surprisingly, Edwards learned how to firewalk in California, from Tolly Burkan, the originator of firewalking workshops in the United States, who also taught Tony Robbins to firewalk. With friends he initiated into firewalking, Edwards traveled around the area giving free introductory lectures, including a 20-minute film. The one I saw was on the SIU campus and attracted about 50 students and faculty.

For the workshop itself, Edwards charged $100 for adults and $50 for students. I was among a couple dozen participants of all ages, from young teens to senior citizens, who attended a workshop on a freezing cold February night at Edwards' home, which he shared with his partner in the Unicorn Hair Clinic, Jim Adams. (Adams, by the way, conducted a spin-off workshop called "Methods of Happiness.")

At the start of the four-hour workshop, we built a bonfire out of fireplace-sized logs, one log for each participant. We solemnly held hands in a circle around the logs as they were doused with kerosene and set ablaze. The flames shot 20 feet into the air and created a terrific blast of heat, causing us to gasp and shrink back, and then to laugh self-consciously.

After returning inside, Edwards directed us to sing songs, talk about our fears, chant "om," and hold a raisin in our mouth without chewing. He performed magic tricks, talked about neuropeptides and endocrines, and gave us tips like to pay attention, relax and "go for it."

In what amounted to a verbal sleight-of-hand, two concepts were intertwined. One is the self-evident fact that people can achieve more if they can control their fear. As Edwards put it, if we couldn't "break through the membrane of our fear," or "take that first step" toward the fire, obviously we couldn't walk on fire. But Edwards also asserted that through the power of the mind we could will our feet not to burn. That we could "choose not to have the body affected," not by fire, germs or even cancer.

The climax of the workshop, and supposedly the proof of mind over matter, was the firewalk. In preparation we were given instruc-

tions not to "turn, jump, stomp or stop, and don't test it with your toe." We were led outside again, this time in bare feet, and joined hands around the fire, standing on compacted snow. The logs had burned down to jagged fist-sized embers that glowed brightly in the dark. The largest chunks were separated, leaving a pathway about six feet long of smoky red coals, which were tamped down with a shovel.

As we stood there holding hands, Edwards had us repeat a silly chant that went, "Release your mind, see what you find, bring it on home to your people." Then Edwards left the circle, and like a model on a runway, he nonchalantly strolled over the coals. Next another firewalking vet trod over the fiery embers, then a couple of the kids, a teacher, some of the reporters and a photographer. When Edwards said "one minute left," I let go of the hands I was holding and gingerly approached the pit. I spread my arms for balance and involuntarily crossed my fingers for luck as I took that first step.

The actual crossing was anti-climactic. Compared to the snow, the coals felt pleasantly warm during the brief fractions of a second my feet were on them. And instead of cutting into my soles, the cinders crushed easily under my weight into a soft ash. Once I stepped off the fire my feet began to sting, but it was from the snow we were standing on. None of us received a single blister.

"People, you gotta believe!" blared the front-page headline in next day's *Southern Illinoisan*. But believe in what? During the workshop I had skipped most of the singing, peeked during the meditation and taken a premature nibble out of my raisin. So how could I have walked on fire?

Figuring some sort of trickery was involved, several days before the workshop I went to the library and came across a 1920 manuscript, published in 1981 under the title *Miracle Mongers and Their Methods*, by famed magician Harry Houdini, who had exposed the fortune tellers, mind readers, séance spiritualists and other charlatans of his day. I knew I was on the right track when chapter one described Japanese monks and Indian fakirs who'd been mystifying tourists for centuries with ritual firewalking demonstrations.

I couldn't talk to Houdini about firewalking, but a foreword to the book had been written by James Randi, who was also a debunker,

and he was still alive. “It’s like the difference between a water pistol and a fire hose,” he told me when I called him at his home in Florida. He said that if I got squirted with boiling water I might not get burned, but that if I were hosed I’d assuredly be scalded. “It’s the volume, not the temperature, that’s important,” he said.

Though burning wood heats up to 1,300 degrees Fahrenheit, (aluminum melts at 1,100 degrees), wood is a relatively light material. Stepping on a denser material, like iron, heated to the same temperature, would indeed fry your feet, positive thinking or not, Randi said. Being lighter, wood gives off fewer calories of heat, and can be touched for brief amounts of time without causing burns.

The secret of firewalking, said Randi, is that it isn’t as dangerous as it appears. It’s like passing your finger through a candle flame, only on a much grander scale. Not that there aren’t risks. Unless the pit is prepared correctly, loose cinders can stick between toes, causing blisters, and severe injuries could occur if someone fell or lingered too long over the coals.

Are firewalking workshops a form of therapy, entertainment or quackery? True, they provide helpful techniques for controlling fear and a chance to walk on fire, but Randi said they can also leave a dangerously false impression. “If people become convinced they have super-normal powers when they don’t, if they think that because they walked on fire they can do anything, what’s to stop them from jumping off a barn because they think they can fly?” he asked.

Edwards disagreed. “Just because you’ve walked on fire, it doesn’t mean you can stop a train or jump off a building without getting hurt,” he said. “That’s silly. But you can overcome limiting beliefs and experience your own power. That’s all I’m trying to do.”

Perhaps it boils down to practicality. Dumbo got his money’s worth from his “magic” feather. Even though he found out it wasn’t magical at all, it helped him learn how to fly, which gave him job security. But unless you plan on joining the circus, there’s just not a whole lot of uses for firewalking. Then again, I didn’t think rap would catch on.

1985
Yesterday's News

Back in the day, before Skype, Twitter, cell phones and the Internet, when the closest thing to Wi-Fi was hi-fi, journalists did the best they could with what they had.

It was shortly after 6 p.m. on a freezing Dec. 16, 1985. I was idly watching the local TV news, snug as a bug in my tiny apartment, when a synapse in my brain fired because the talking head said there was a hostage situation in progress near Carbondale. Earlier in the day, a knife-wielding 21-year-old Chicago man had abducted his former girlfriend, a 16-year-old Carbondale high school student, and police had tracked them to a farmhouse outside of town.

"Oh crap," sparked the neuron in my brain. "This means I might have to go to work."

As the local correspondent for the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, I'd normally be assigned to such a breaking news story, but in this case there were two reasons why I might not be. First there was the timing. The *Post* didn't have a website because the World Wide Web didn't exist yet, and my daily deadline had passed, which meant my story couldn't get in the Illinois section of the next morning's paper. And by the day after, it would be, as they say, "yesterday's news."

The second factor was that the *Post* probably wouldn't become aware of the hostage situation unless I told someone about it, and I wasn't sure I wanted to spend the night freezing my tootsies in some field, waiting for the standoff to conclude. After weighing the pros and cons, I decided to immediately alert my editor — as soon as he came to work the next morning.

But a half-hour later I got a call from a night editor. It seems a St. Louis radio station had picked up the story, and a reporter who happened to hear it while driving home from work phoned in the tip. The editor asked me what I knew about a kidnapping in Carbondale.

"I've been monitoring the situation," I told her. "Monitoring" is a technical journalism term stringers use. Nowadays, it means googling or tweeting. Back then, it meant reading newspapers and

listening to TV and radio newscasts.

If I was able to get a story to the editor before midnight, it could still make it into the next morning's newspaper, she told me, and if the story became "significant" (that's another journalism term, which means someone dies), it might make the front page. "Find out what you can and get back to me," said the editor. Koplowitz was on the story.

Finding out where the hostage was being held was my first problem. I headed over to the Sheriff's Department, to deal in person with that most dreaded of news sources, the night radio dispatcher, who is not authorized to say anything more than what is on outdated press releases. Sure enough, the dispatcher read a press release to me, which ended with a caution not to go near the crime scene.

"To make sure I avoid the crime scene, I was wondering if you could tell me where it is," I tried.

A deputy happened to be standing nearby, and he glared disdainfully at me and my pathetic ploy. "Intersection of Dillinger and Reed Station roads," he said.

I knew I had reached my destination when I saw a half-dozen cars and vans parked on the side of a rural farm road. Inside the vehicles was "the pack" of local reporters, who were staking out the story. Beyond the vehicles was a State Police car blocking the road. The only weapon the kidnapper had was a pocketknife, but the barricade was far enough away to protect us from a hunting rifle. Off in the distance, all we could see was a police van with floodlights eerily illuminating a farmhouse, which looked like something out of the movie *Psycho*.

Stumbling over frozen dirt clods, looking for a better view, I came across what appeared to be some sort of alien technology for making crop circles. Looming in the darkness near a cornfield, it took me a moment to recognize the tall spindly tower and noisy generator of a portable microwave transmitter that had been dispatched by the nearest CBS affiliate, KFVS-TV in Cape Girardeau, Missouri.

The bulky transmitter allowed KFVS to do what anyone with a smartphone can do today — "live remotes" — which means reporting live from the scene. KFVS and the NBC affiliate, WPSD in Paducah, Kentucky, had live remote capabilities, while the ABC

affiliate, WSIL in Harrisburg, Illinois, did not.

Just in time for the 10 o'clock news, Jackson County Sheriff Bill Kilquist showed up at the media stakeout to do live remote interviews with Mike Schuh of KFVS and Dave Stricklin of WPSD. Kilquist said the standoff might last all night, and that his first priority was to see that no one got hurt.

Out of microphone range, the state trooper in the squad car blocking the road growled that the kidnapper only had a knife, and he didn't understand why they didn't just "get it over with."

The KFVS interview took place in front of the squad car. After it was over, the trooper turned off the revolving police lights, which Schuh had requested be flashing during the interview.

"I would consider it an honor if you would do an exposé of that staged media event," Schuh told me afterwards. No problem, Mike.

It got to be time for me to get a story to the *Post*, which meant I had to find a gas station with a pay phone. But when I called the editor, she was disappointed that the standoff wasn't over. "Go home and continue monitoring from there," she said.

So I went home, about a 20-minute drive, and thawed out watching the end of *Monday Night Football*, which was followed by WSIL news, which (without a live remote) reported the hostage situation was still continuing. Another synapse fired in my brain. A real reporter wouldn't have gone home. Koplowitz was back on the story.

I arrived back at the media stakeout at the stroke of midnight. The pack was trying to stay warm in the WPSD van, eating burgers and trading "war" stories. I got in the van, sat down, looked up, and it was over. The police had stormed the house, saved the girl and taken the man into custody. None of us had seen a thing.

We clambered out of the van and jogged toward the house. We got there as the sheriff was placing the handcuffed suspect in a squad car. There was time for one quick question. Feeling like Sam Donaldson, I shouted, "Is everyone OK?"

Kilquist frowned, then responded, "Everyone's OK." As he drove away, Schuh whispered to his cameraman, "rock and roll," apparently a code word to start filming.

I was crestfallen that I'd missed the storming of the house. But Illinois State Trooper Jim Stevens was wandering around outside, and

when I asked him what happened, to my surprise, he said, “C’mon, I’ll show you.”

He took me and the other reporters into the kitchen and described how a State Police hostage negotiator had stood outside the front door. He then showed how the suspect had crouched on the other side of the door talking with the trooper, and pointed to a corner of the room where the victim had been huddling under some cabinets.

He said the trooper crashed through the door and bowled over the suspect, and a squad of police followed, subduing him before he could resist. Later I was told that unlike most cops, Stevens was comfortable with the media, being the trooper who took reporters on ride-along drug busts.

About a half-hour later a radio reporter, Joey Helleny of WCIL in Carbondale, had the honor of being the first reporter to inform the rest of the world that the hostage crisis was over. The live remote capabilities of the two TV stations had been rendered impotent because the stations had already gone off the air for the night.

Just like in the movies, the *Southern Illinoisan* held the presses past its final deadline to get the story in its morning edition, and an editor was pressed into service to attend a 2 a.m. press conference, as did I.

My story? By the time I talked to my editor in the morning, he already had a wire story in hand. “Besides,” he said, “it’s yesterday’s news.”

1986

The Seduction of Andrew

This vainglorious tale of friendship and ambition poses the eternal question: to put out or not to put out?

I'd never lusted for Andy before. We'd have drinks together and talk, but that was it.

Andrew Leighton, 24, was a former SIU student body president and current student representative on the SIU Board of Trustees. I was 10 years older and a special correspondent for the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. It's funny, but in the beginning he pursued me. When he found out I worked for a big city newspaper, he wanted me to give him publicity.

I told him that by being student body president he was halfway home. Now all he had to do was kill somebody and I could make him front-page news. I may have even called him a media slut. I was so flippant with Andrew. So patronizing. For little did I know that someday I would want him as much as he wanted me.

I first realized I lusted for Andy at a search committee meeting of the SIU Board of Trustees at the Student Center. The SIU Woodwind Quintet had performed for the committee, and the lush tones of the horns were echoing in my ears as I headed for the exit.

At the top of the stairs I bumped into Andy, who asked me for a ride home. "Sure," I said nonchalantly, but my heart was pounding. During the committee meeting I'd sat with the other reporters, mulling over the big "get" of the moment, which had to do with the search for a new SIU chancellor. As usual, the trustees were keeping the identities of the finalists a secret, except for the fact that they were all white males.

All the reporters wanted to be the first to reveal the names, and I was trying to figure out how I might go about getting this big scoop, when my eyes were drawn to Andy. He seemed to have an aura about him, and I could have sworn I heard harp music, as it dawned on me that as the student trustee, my dear precious Andrew knew the names of the finalists.

"Andy, my man," I said, as we walked to my car. "My main man." I casually looped an arm over his shoulder and pulled him closer. "You have something I want," I whispered in his ear. "And you know you want to give it to me or you wouldn't have asked me for a ride."

"You must mean the names," he stiffened.

It felt like he'd caught me staring at his breasts. "Whadaya say we have a beer and discuss it?" I persisted. He warily agreed.

We went to a local bistro called The Tap, and when our drinks arrived, I began putting the moves on him. "I know the trustees have tried to convince you that you should keep the names secret," I began. "But there's nothing illegal about revealing the identities of job applicants. The only people who benefit from secrecy are the trustees themselves. By keeping the names secret they avoid public oversight of their choices."

Andy nodded and had a sip of beer, and I could tell he was tempted.

"Secrecy may be a courtesy to the job candidates, but they're grownups," I continued. "Does the university want a chancellor who can't hold up to public scrutiny? Better to find out sooner than later."

"It sure would separate the white men from the white boys," Andy quipped and had another sip.

"Seriously, Andy, if they tried to pick the president of the United States in secrecy, people would be outraged," I said. "Why should public university presidents be any different, when their salaries are also paid by the taxpayers?"

"But I kind of promised not to tell," he resisted.

I had Andy flustered, and before he could compose himself, I turned up the charm. "It's not really cheating," I said, gazing into his eyes. "You are a trustee, but you are the student trustee, the students' watchdog on the board. Which is more in the public's interest, secrecy or transparency? Are you going to be a fearless public servant or a lackey for the administration?"

He flushed, and I could sense he was teetering on the edge. Enough foreplay. "It could just be our little secret," I purred. "Or, you could go all the way and let me identify you as the source. I'll make you famous."

We stared at each other across the table and had a moment. Demurely, Andy said he would think about it.

But over the next 48 hours someone got to him. I knew it when I called his campus office and he put me on hold. Andy had never kept the special correspondent for the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* on hold before. "I've made my decision, but you're not going to like it," he said when he finally got on the line.

"I understand," I said, grumpily. "I won't ask you twice."

It might have ended there, but an hour later as I was doing errands, I spotted him walking home from school. I offered him a ride and we stopped for coffee.

Andy said a "friend" had advised him not to release the names so he wouldn't get a reputation as a whistleblower. He said he'd also confided in a liberal professor on the search committee who had publicly criticized the secrecy. The professor told him that since they had made a commitment to withhold the candidates' names, they should either honor their vows or resign. Andy looked away. "Can we still be friends?" he asked.

I smiled. Though disappointed, I respected his decision. For all their help to reporters, Deep Throat types live difficult lives. Some whistleblowers become heroes, while others get typecast as erratic, untrustworthy or nuts. They tend to get fired a lot, sued, pursued and even murdered. Picking up Andy at the Student Center and trying to seduce him to put out had made me feel sleazy. I might have scored a scoop, but would anyone have respected him in the morning?

1987
Fair and Loathing

Before entering journalism grad school in 1987, I took a summer job writing press releases for the Illinois State Fair in Springfield, and by extension, the administration of Gov. James R. Thompson. It gave me pause, because in a few months I would become a news intern, reporting on the administration I was accepting a paycheck from. Worrying about a potential conflict of interest or appearance of impropriety may seem quaint today, when a Republican political consultant like Roger Ailes can claim the cable news channel he runs, Fox News, is "fair and balanced," or a civil rights activist like the Rev. Al Sharpton can organize a protest rally for the family of Florida "stand your ground" shooting victim Trayvon Martin, and then "report" on the rally on his MSNBC show. In my case, I wasn't overly concerned that a temporary state government job would compromise my objectivity. But maybe I should have been, because it did change my perspective on the difference between being objective and, well, fair. Dedicated to Jim Skilbeck, 1949-2002.

Patronage Flack

There must have been 500 people packed around the railing of the stinky smelly Swine Barn show arena at the Illinois State Fair. Waving my press pass, I pushed through the crowd and entered the media area, joining about 30 reporters lugging notebooks, microphones and cameras. Everyone was focused on a swarthy suburban Chicago man, who was down on all fours in the straw and dirt, snorting like a pig. The Hog Calling Contest was but one of the many "stories" I covered during my brief tenure as a press officer for the fair. In addition to the hog callers, I got to see the Biggest Boar, Pork King Cook-off and Sale of Champions. Not to mention the harness racing and Grandstand shows. Or backstage hot tub.

Not that everything was bucolic. The hours were long, the pay minimal, and there were also the ethical considerations. Two terms generally at odds with the journalistic profession are "patronage" and

"public relations," and my job was both. Having been a reporter and freelancer, I figured I was well qualified to write for the fair. But I never would have gotten the job if it weren't for my friend Jim Skilbeck, whose title was special assistant to Gov. James R. Thompson.

Jim and I met in 1976, when Thompson was first running for governor, as a moderate Republican. I was a student reporter at the *Daily Egyptian*, and Jim was an assistant press secretary for the former Chicago federal prosecutor who had shined his star by putting away some big names, including a former governor, and early in his career, "sick" comedian Lenny Bruce.

Jim had orchestrated a campaign swing through southern Illinois, and had invited the *DE* to send a student reporter to ride in the candidate's RV from a cafe in Herrin to an American Legion hall in Anna, about 40 miles. I drew the assignment, and during the ride, I asked the candidate whether he favored decriminalizing marijuana. I thought I had him in a bind — if Thompson said he was against easing pot laws, it could turn off SIU students, but if he said he was for it, he might piss off the law-and-order folks in Herrin and Anna. But he casually batted my question aside, saying sometimes leaders should lead and other times they should follow the will of the people, which at the time was anti-pot.

When I got my first journalism job, at the *Illinois Times*, I saw Jim at a Springfield pub and started to introduce myself, but he remembered my name and what I'd asked his boss on the bus. Some years after that we ran into each other on the strip in Carbondale, tipped a few beers and took a shining to each other. He became my token conservative friend and I was his token liberal friend, though truth be told, our political views weren't that far apart.

At age 38, Skilbeck had become Thompson's "senior aide," the staffer who had been with him the longest, and one of the perks that came with being the governor's senior aide was the clout to use the patronage system to give friends jobs. In most cases, "friends" meant political friends, card-carrying members of the party in power, people who had donated money or worked for candidates. Having never donated a dime nor lifted a finger to help any politician, and having voted against Thompson in 1982, I didn't fit into the category of political friend. But there is a subcategory of patronage, also

frowned on by journalists, called nepotism, in which non-political relatives and friends of people in power get jobs, and it was my honor to be Jim's friend.

Over the years we occasionally joked about him getting me a patronage job — I would be abandoning my journalistic ethics, and he would be using his clout to hire someone with absolutely no Republican credentials. But it wasn't until I returned to Springfield to enter the Public Affairs Reporting graduate program at Sangamon State University (now University of Illinois Springfield) that either of us took the idea seriously. It was expediency, impulse and a bit of perversity that prompted me to ask Jim if there might be a temporary state job in Springfield over the summer to ease my transition to grad school.

His face lit up. "You could write press releases for the State Fair," he said. Jim's face always lit up when he talked about the fair. It was the part of his job that he loved the most, and he literally lived on the fairgrounds during the event. I had never shared his enthusiasm for the exposition, but I'd never been through the experience, either.

"I guess I'd be writing a lot of stories about livestock contests," I said skeptically.

"That's about it," he said. "But you'd be at the fair."

It was a tough call. Since in six months I'd be interning with a news bureau that covered the governor, I didn't want to compromise my objectivity or credibility by taking a job in his administration. But I really needed the money, and besides, there was something irresistibly naughty about slipping over to the other side for a couple of months and having a fling as a patronage flack.

Ag Etiquette

The State Fair Press Office was a creature that came to life just two months out of the year. When I was there, it consisted of three other writers and an editor, who happened to be a former PAR grad student. In addition, there were two photographers and a photo editor, two messengers and two coordinators in charge of press credentials. The supervisor was Mia Jazo, a bright and energetic woman in her

late 20s who had just taken over the job. Her boss was Mark Randal, the press secretary for the Ag Department.

As I became acquainted with my co-workers and those in other departments, I couldn't resist asking them, "who got you your job?" Judging from the vague and guarded responses, I wasn't the only one sensitive about being a patronage worker. But after some winking and prodding, it usually came out that if they didn't know someone who was someone, their parents or someone else knew someone who was someone. Some I didn't have to ask, like one young fellow with the same last name as a senior official in the Ag Department, who was briefly with our office until his nocturnal golf cart escapades got him transferred to another division.

Shortly after meeting the other writers — three intelligent and attractive females half my age — Mia asked us to write down which venues we wanted to cover and left us together in a room. Here it comes, I thought to myself. Livestock City. But I was in for a surprise. "I want to cover beef," piped up one of the women. "No, I want beef," said another.

"OK, then I get to cover pork," said the first. "I wanted pork," complained the third. "But that's OK. I'll take sheep and goats."

My mouth dropped open. "You … like … livestock?" I blurted in bewilderment.

"Sure," they responded in unison.

"Bless you my children," I said.

Next came an icy pause. Finally, the one who got beef spoke: "So what's the matter with *livestock*?" she demanded.

I bit down hard on my tongue. "Not a thing," I said lightly. "It's just that all you've left for me is the harness racing, so I guess I'll have to take that."

Covering the harness races mostly meant reporting the results at the end of the day, so when I wasn't hanging out at the track, I helped cover events on the other "beats." We reported on many of the same things as real reporters, but our jobs were mostly exercises in absurdity. Our press releases were sent to hundreds of print and broadcast media across the state and nation, but most got one cursory glance from a low echelon copy editor before getting tossed in the trash. Still, it was important that we got them right, because those that did

get used sometimes were printed verbatim and unedited.

It hadn't really sunk in for me before that the State Fair was under the Agriculture Department for a reason, and that most of the other patronage jobs went to people with an ag background who were far more qualified than I was to be working at the fair. Thanks to Jim, the Psychedelic Furs might perform for one night, but the meat and potatoes of the fair was the livestock show, one of the largest such expositions in the country. I might have known something about journalism, but my coworkers knew farm animals. They'd shown livestock in 4-H competitions and one wanted to become a farm reporter.

They also knew about ag etiquette, and I soon learned to never call a hog a pig. I also learned that there are queens and there are queens. One of the writers had been a county Beef Queen, which was not a beauty contest, she emphasized, but a competition for a representative to promote the beef industry. She said she had also been an Angus Ebonette, whose job it was to go around to county fairs and hand out ribbons.

"Does the Angus Ebonette have to compete against other cattle princesses, like the Heifer Princess, before she can become the Beef Queen?" I asked.

By the way she glared at me, I knew I'd stepped in something again. "A heifer is a cow," she corrected me.

Public Trough

There are two stages in the life cycle of a State Fair press officer. The first six weeks are slow and easy, with plenty of time to goof off, followed by a bacchanalian fortnight of nonstop workdays and all-night partying. The one major pre-fair event, or pseudo-event, that the Press Office was responsible for was a press tour, during which a couple hundred media representatives were given a ride-through of the fairgrounds on open air buses, with commentary from the fair superintendent, followed by a free lunch. Its purpose was to get reporters who usually cover crime and politics up to speed on what was new at the fairgrounds. The tour was also an attempt to stir up enthusiasm and good will among congenitally blasé reporters who

thought that covering the fair was beneath their dignity.

The year I was there, the arrangements were more elaborate than usual. To promote the first year of parimutuel betting at the fair, a harness race was staged. The simulation included having the reporters place fake bets at a parimutuel window, and those who won got paid with oversized two-dollar bills with Gov. Thompson's face in the center, which the media dubbed "Jim Bucks."

The "Press Stakes" was Mia's idea, and from a PR standpoint, it was a gem. The harness race gave the TV stations plenty of visuals, and subliminally, having the reporters place bets revved up their interest. The race turned out to be competitive, and as the six horses rounded the final turn in a pack and raced down the stretch, some of the normally laid-back reporters began to root their horses home. Even if most of the reporters didn't bother to collect their Jim Bucks, they had not merely observed but experienced the emotional thrill of betting on a horse race, and that excitement came through in their stories.

Following the tour, the reporters retired to the Press Office patio for their free lunch, and I was accosted by reporter Tom Atkins of the alternative weekly *Illinois Times*, where I had once worked. He wanted to know if there wasn't something improper about providing free food to people who were supposed to report objectively on the fair.

Airily, I told him that if the reporters were willing to go through the drudgery of the annual press tour, the least we could do was provide them with something to eat afterwards. But Atkins' question had rattled me, because I still had qualms about being a patronage flack, and I was getting some bitter satisfaction from watching other journalists lining up at the public trough, albeit to a far lesser degree than I.

Tough Questions

The Press Office office was located on the third floor of the dilapidated Illinois Building, behind a giant statue of Abe Lincoln just inside the Main Gate. The third floor also provided workspaces

for about a half-dozen real news organizations covering the fair, including the *State Journal-Register*, *Chicago Tribune* and Tribune Radio Network. It was also the scene of daily press conferences with venerable Fair Superintendent Merle Miller, where the first order of business was to announce the previous day's attendance and speculate on whether total attendance would break the magic number of one million again.

Press Office employees were issued the same press passes as the real reporters, which gave us free access anywhere on the fairgrounds until 6:30 p.m., and free admission for ourselves and a guest to stand on the track during the Grandstand shows at night. Best of all, the passes granted us golf cart privileges, and golf carts were the most regal mode of transportation on the fairgrounds.

Flacks also have the pleasant but sometimes frustrating task of only reporting the good news and putting the best face on what few negatives pop up. For instance, as he had in previous years, Gov. Thompson showed up to eat the winning meal at the Pork King Cook-off. As he was stuffing his face with the winning butterfly pork chops and mugging for the photographers, Ben Kinningham of Tribune Radio poked his microphone through the throng and asked an unappetizing question: "Governor, what's your reaction to the group in Chicago who want to chain themselves to the gate of your home to protest your stand on pending AIDS legislation?"

Between bites, Thompson said he would let them protest at his house or talk with them at his office, but not both. "I believe the private residence of public officials should remain private," he said.

Next it was my turn. "I got another tough question for you, Governor," I began. "How's your lunch?"

The biggest hard news to come out of the fair was a Sunday night storm that blew down tents, stranded riders on the aerial lift and injured several people. The Press Office didn't issue a press release on that incident. Nor did we touch the porta potty scandal. Seems a disgruntled bidder on the fair porta potty contract leaked a story, appropriately to a newspaper nicknamed the "Urinal-Register," that the winning bidder's potties were substandard and poorly maintained.

The newspaper's ag reporter, Charlyn Fargo, "investigated" 30 of the potties and found some were without toilet paper, light bulbs

or proper drainage. Her story resulted in a state hearing on the potties and a reprimand to the owner. But further investigation also revealed that more than 100 of the toilets had been vandalized, or sabotaged, casting suspicion on the bidder/leaker who stood to gain if the other portable toilet company lost its state contract.

Livestock City

About a million people a year visit the Illinois State Fair. So do thousands of horses, steers, cows, sheep, goats, chickens, rabbits, pigeons, barrows and gilts. Their owners cart them around to fairs all over the country, trying to earn premiums, stud fees and auction proceeds. It's also a time for the owners to get off the farm, socialize with their peers and show off their products.

Livestock expositions may leave some city folk cold, or with allergies, but for the thousands of farmers who attend the shows it is a time to take pride in their industry. It's also not a bad life for the animals, considering the alternative. Take Dallas, the winner of the fair's Biggest Boar Contest. Dallas was destined to become sausage until his gross obesity caught the eye of Marvin Caldwell of Littleton, Illinois, whose hobby happened to be exhibiting heftiest hogs. The half-ton Yorkshire got a reprieve from the slaughterhouse and instead toured the county fair circuit, where adoring fans showered him with affection just for mugging in his pen like the world's biggest ham.

The climax of the livestock show was the Sale of Champions, a choreographed auction of the junior champion steer, barrow, wether, market pen and pen of rabbits, i.e., champion castrated bull, similarly altered hog and goat, three chickens and three rabbits, whose registered owners are 4-H members under 20 years old.

The "auction" was another of those pseudo-events for politicians, and especially the governor. The year before, Thompson's daughter Samantha had purchased the champion rabbits (with Thompson campaign funds), to the feigned chagrin of her parents. This time Samantha was supposed to buy the champion hog, but something went wrong. As the bidding began, Skilbeck whispered to me that Samantha would buy the swine for about $9,000 — with the money

coming from Chicago Bears coach Mike Ditka — and the hog would be used for a promotion at Ditka's Restaurant in Chicago, which featured pork chops.

But things got out of control. Mother Jayne was sitting next to Samantha, cuing her to bid, but as the price neared and then cleared $9,000, Big Jim took over the coaching. And when the bidding reached $10,200, he physically restrained his precocious adolescent from raising her hand again. The victorious bidder was farm reporter Stu Ellis of radio station WSOY in Decatur, on behalf of the Friends of Macon County 4-H. "I thought Ditka was supposed to buy the barrow," Ellis said, savoring the moment.

Typically, Skilbeck put a positive spin on the debacle. "It's more money for the seller," he noted.

Golf Cart Derby

Like a political convention, everybody who's anybody at the fair has at least one laminated pass, and those who are really somebody accumulate handfuls of cards, pins and decals, which they dangle from neck lanyards, or in some cases shoelaces. The passes grant their bearers various perks, including free parking, golf cart privileges and access to press areas. With the exception of the yellow security pass, the most coveted pass on the fairgrounds was the orange "All Access" pass, which in addition to all the other privileges, provided free admittance to the reviewing stand at Grandstand shows, and most importantly, nighttime access to the backstage compound on the infield, where the entertainers hung out and the real partying took place.

Access to the infield was through a tunnel beneath the racetrack, which had a security guard at both ends. The tunnel came out beneath the stage, where there were dressing rooms, a modest dining area with picnic tables and catered food, and offices for the stage crew. Behind the stage and inside a rickety picket fence was the compound itself, where my friend Jim and some of the other fair organizers lived in three recreation vehicles and a travel bus. Each night a bevy of friends, sycophants and potential conquests trekked backstage to

make merry.

There was a large and inviting Jacuzzi that created a minor flap. The official objection was that image-wise the hot tub appeared decadent, and would reflect negatively on the governor if it found its way into the newspapers. On a more visceral level, there was concern that the hot tub filters might become clogged with illicit ejaculates.

But backstage turned out to be pretty tame. The major diversions were free booze, watching groupies trying to board that night's band's bus, and intermittent displays of pyrotechnics. In earlier times backstage may have been more risqué, but as one backstage vet noted, "nothing goes on anymore because backstage has become a very public place." But it was also an oasis from the franticness of the fair, both a command post and getaway, where fair officials, spouses and friends, including a few media people, could go off the record, blow off steam and talk out of school.

Without an orange pass, the only way to get backstage at night was to be escorted by someone who had one. My efforts to procure an orange pass were stymied because before being laminated, they had the names of the people they were issued to written on the backs. Toward the end of the fair, I told Jim it was getting to be a hassle for me to find an escort every night, and asked if there wasn't a simpler way.

We were standing in an RV in the compound that served as his home during the fair, and he picked up an orange pass that happened to by lying on a table. "Take this," he said and tossed it to me.

When I turned it over, it read, "Governor Jim Thompson 1-A." I held the pass gingerly. "You sure about this?" I asked.

"Don't worry," Skilbeck said. "He doesn't need it."

On the last night of the fair, the annual Golf Cart Derby took place on "the world's fastest dirt oval mile." The event had become quite competitive. The previous year, members of President Reagan's Secret Service detail and staff participated, and someone broke an arm. About midnight, entertainment manager Mike DuBois appeared with a bullhorn and hummed the call to post. "Drivers, start your golf carts," he crackled over the bullhorn.

About a dozen carts with drivers and riders lined up in front of the Grandstand and took off to the accompaniment of bottle rockets.

In the minutes it took the carts to circle the track, a length of toilet paper was unrolled across the finish line, and spectators shook up beers to spray on the winner. That year's race had a ringer in it, as a cart that had been a dog all week was surreptitiously souped up by the fair's press secretary. Ridden by two female photographers, the fillies finished 100 yards ahead of the rest of the field.

Fairness

The fair was over, and so was my job. I began taking journalism and government classes at SSU, where the subject of patronage came up periodically, causing me to cringe. But I didn't feel like my interlude as a patronage flack had turned me into a partisan. Rather, it gave me a deeper insight into how state government works, and in many cases doesn't work.

Besides, long before I accepted a favor from Skilbeck, my objectivity had been compromised by our friendship. I could no longer view him as a faceless news source, but as a flesh and blood human being, with feelings and a personal life that could be affected by what I wrote. And it occurred to me that maybe that wasn't a bad thing. That when reporting on criminals, celebrities and politicians, instead of viewing them as grist for the daily news grind, they should be treated like human beings. That doesn't mean pulling punches or fudging facts, but reporting on them fairly, without cheap shots. It means objectivity with a heart, and I make no apologies for that.

1995

48 Hours at Camp O.J.

Shortly before midnight on June 11, 1994, the bodies of O.J. Simpson's ex-wife, Nicole Brown Simpson, 35, and her friend, restaurant waiter Ronald Goldman, 25, were found savagely stabbed to death outside Nicole's condo on Bundy Drive in West Los Angeles. O.J. and Nicole's children, Sydney, 8, and Justin, 5, were asleep in an upstairs bedroom, while Simpson had taken a red-eye flight from LAX to Chicago. Within hours, Los Angeles police went to Simpson's lavish Brentwood home on Rockingham Avenue, about two miles away, where Kato Kaelin, who would become the world's most famous houseguest, told them he heard three thumps in the night. Near the thumps, LAPD Detective Mark Fuhrman, who would become America's most famous racist, found a bloody glove that matched one at the crime scene.

Police used the emerging science of DNA analysis to tie the 47-year-old Hall of Fame football player, sportscaster, pitchman and actor to the murders. Instead of surrendering, O.J. issued a rambling, vaguely suicidal statement through his attorney, Robert Kardashian. Hours later the police — and media — discovered that Simpson's friend, Al Cowlings, was driving his Ford Bronco on the San Diego Freeway, with the former NFL star in the backseat, holding a gun to his own head. Thus ensued the infamous "slow-speed chase" that played out live in primetime on network TV, turning a sordid double homicide involving a minor black celebrity into a national spectacle that exposed racial fault lines and set the standard for media madness to this day.

Simpson was jailed without bail and charged with two counts of first-degree murder, but prosecutors decided not to seek the death penalty. He hired a "Dream Team" of lawyers who claimed Simpson had been framed by a racist police department, and instead of being tried in affluent Santa Monica, near where the murders occurred, the proceedings were held in downtown Los Angeles, where the jury pool was more diverse. Although the case was about whether O.J. Simpson murdered Nicole Brown Simpson and Ron Goldman, celeb-

rity justice, interracial couples, domestic violence, tabloidization of the media, racism and police corruption were all on trial. And three years after riots broke out when an all-white jury in Simi Valley exonerated four police officers for the videotaped beating of black motorist Rodney King, a mostly black jury had an opportunity to turn the tables on justice.

By the time Simpson's trial began on Jan. 29, 1995, I'd been a public information officer for nearly seven years and had hated every minute of it. So when a friend said he might be able to get me into the biggest media event of the day, I decided to pretend I was a journalist and cover the trial like I was a freelancer. Besides sneaking into the courtroom, I buzzed the crime scene, hung out in the press room and asked a dumped juror a question at a news conference. I also saw in microcosm the cynical strategies of the defense and prosecution, the shenanigans of the lawyers and judge, the odd interplay between the media and the trial proceedings, and the agony of the jurors. I had a blast, but by the time I finished writing a story, Simpson had been found not guilty and everyone was sick of O.J. stories. Is it still too soon?

Change of Venue

Sullen O.J., surly Ito, flamboyant Johnnie Cochran, feisty Marcia Clark and the rest of that tawdry cast from the trial of the century were doing their shtick. Only instead of watching them on TV, I had a ringside seat in the courtroom. It was Tuesday, Aug. 1, 1995, a routine day in the marathon trial of O.J. Simpson, but one I'll never forget. And I owe it all to Matt Krasnowski.

I first met Matt in 1988, when he was a statehouse reporter for Copley News Service in Springfield, Illinois, and I was interning at the Capitol for the Copley-owned *State Journal-Register*. When I became a flack for the state, he continued to be a hack for the wire service, and over time we both got bored with our jobs but were unable to find anything better. In 1994, his bride got a job with a trade organization in Chattanooga, Tennessee, and Matt followed. The

32-year-old suburban Chicago native quit his job, bought a laptop and tried to freelance. He was out of the business.

But Matt couldn't sit at home, and he soon became a court reporter for the *Chattanooga Times*. Then, out of the blue, in July 1994, he got a call from an editor at Copley who asked whether he might be interested in either of two jobs that had opened up in California. One was in sleepy Sacramento, where he'd cover the Legislature like he'd been doing in Springfield. The other was in Los Angeles, La La Land, where he'd cover the courts like he was doing in Chattanooga, only his first assignment would be the O.J. Simpson trial.

I couldn't understand why some more senior reporter at Copley hadn't grabbed the opportunity. But at the time there were two kinds of people — O.J. snobs who didn't want anything to do with the case, and O.J. sluts who couldn't get enough of it — and I guess the other Copley reporters fell into the first category. Matt apparently did not, and neither did I, because the next month I was stunned and envious to begin seeing his byline on Simpson stories in the *Journal-Register*. In December, Matt sent me a Christmas card that included a brief P.S. to "come visit," and when the trial dragged on into the summer of 1995, I decided to take him up on his offer.

By the time I arrived in Los Angeles at the end of July, prosecutors had finished presenting their "mountain of evidence," and the Dream Team was trying to raise reasonable doubt by claiming the police had framed O.J. because he was black. The prosecution's first blunder had been to spend the first two weeks of the trial trying to trash Simpson's reputation by presenting evidence that he had beaten his wife in the past, frustrating jurors who wanted to hear about the murders. Simpson had never been convicted of assaulting his wife, but police — including Detective Fuhrman — had responded to Nicole's emergency calls several times, and Judge Lance Ito had allowed prosecutors to present evidence that Simpson had hit her, pushed her into walls and humiliated her in public. Most compelling were the posthumous contents of Nicole's safe deposit box, which included Polaroid photos of her bruised and swollen face from when the football player knocked her around on New Year's Day 1989, and a frantic 911 call placed by Nicole in 1993, as O.J. was breaking into her townhouse.

Prosecutors asserted that "a slap is a prelude to homicide," but for the defense, Harvard attorney Alan Dershowitz argued that even if Simpson had committed domestic violence, only one in 2,500 people who beat their spouses end up killing them. What he — and prosecutors — failed to note was that the chances that a man who killed his ex-wife had abused her in the past is closer to 90 percent.

Another problem for the prosecution was that Simpson had only about an hour and 15 minutes to drive to the murder scene, fatally stab two people, drive home, clean up and conceal evidence of the crime — between 9:45 p.m., when Kato Kaelin said he and O.J. returned to Rockingham from McDonald's, until 11 p.m., when a limousine driver testified that he picked up Simpson to take him to LAX. The murder weapon, most likely a knife, was never found, along with the presumably blood-soaked clothes the killer was wearing, save for socks and gloves, which the defense claimed had been planted. Two witnesses who said they saw Simpson driving his Bronco near the murder scene were never called by prosecutors because they sold their stories to the tabloids.

But the crux of the prosecution's case was the DNA evidence — submicroscopic double helixes of self-replicating deoxyribonucleic acids that are in all the cells of all living things. DNA contains genetic markers that can be used to identify with a high degree of certainty from whom a drop of blood or skin cell came, and to trace someone's parentage back nearly to the primordial ooze.

Prosecutors alleged that Simpson left a "trail of blood" from the crime scene on Bundy, into his Bronco, and back to his estate on Rockingham. Drops of blood found next to shoe prints leading away from the bodies contained Simpson's DNA. Blood found in Simpson's SUV had genetic markers from the accused and both victims, and a drop of blood found on a sock in Simpson's bedroom had DNA from both O.J. and Nicole. Most incriminating was a pair of Isotoner leather gloves, one of which was found at the murder scene, and the other behind Simpson's guest house, still damp with the blood of Simpson and both victims. The jury had sat through weeks of agonizing scientific jargon that boiled down to one immutable fact — the odds that the blood found at the crime scene, in Simpson's SUV and at his home didn't belong to the accused and the victims were a

gazillion to one.

My first full day in Los Angeles was a Sunday, July 30, and I dragged Matt out to Venice Beach for a change of venue. But Matt's attitude toward the trial was both cynical and obsessive, so on the way we detoured through Brentwood, where he showed me the Mezzaluna restaurant, where Ron Goldman had worked as a waiter and Nicole Brown Simpson and her family had their last supper. From there it was just a short ride to Nicole's townhouse condo, a rather nondescript dwelling, at least by L.A. standards, where the grisly double murder had occurred. And it was only a few minutes north across Sunset Boulevard before we were cruising past O.J.'s walled compound on Rockingham. Feeling like "looky-loos," a local term for drivers who snarl freeway traffic by slowing to gawk at accidents, we didn't looky-loo (it's also a verb).

I asked Matt if he thought O.J. did it. He was silent for a moment, but couldn't contain himself. "Did it, did it, did it!" he exploded. Then he looked at me sheepishly and added, "but you can't write that." He said that if it got out that he was leaning one way or the other, even though his reporting was fair and balanced, he'd get thrown off the case faster than a juror. He said he didn't think there was a single journalist at Camp O.J. who didn't feel the same way, but that I couldn't write that either.

As we strolled down the Venice Boardwalk, Matt contrasted the laid-back crowd with his typically hectic day. Like most of the news outlets, Copley had team coverage on O.J., and Matt often shared a byline with the entertainment reporter, who usually watched the trial the same as most people — from her home TV. The Los Angeles area bureau chief and another writer also shared O.J. reporting duties. The in-court reporter's main task was to note the one thing the TV reporter couldn't see, which I called "jury twitch." Yet a third reporter might be reading sidebar transcripts, motions and other court documents, covering impromptu press conferences, conducting interviews or chasing down leads. All the reporters shared each other's jobs, and sometimes they did them all the same day.

O.J. Madness

By 8 a.m. Monday, it was already hot and sticky when Matt and I set out for the epicenter of O.J. madness, the Criminal Courts Building in downtown Los Angeles. The entire area was known as Camp O.J., but the actual Camp O.J. was in a parking lot across the street from the courthouse, where the TV stations had set up a temporary, fenced-in, compound of satellite dishes and tents on stilts that served as on-location studios. The public wasn't allowed in the actual Camp O.J., but a restive crowd — and vendors hustling an array of O.J. memorabilia including garish T-shirts, watches with Simpson's face and tiny knives instead of hour and minute hands, and toilet paper with O.J.'s visage on every tissue — had gathered in front of the courthouse. I walked to the public entrance, where I got scrutinized and scanned, while Matt sailed through a separate entrance for the media. Reconnecting in the lobby, we took an elevator to the 12th floor, passed some camera crews and entered a room set aside for the print media.

The official O.J. Simpson press room looked like, well, a press room. Roughly the size and shape of a windowless boxcar, the room was jammed with cheap banquet tables and rickety chairs. All that separated the news bureaus were grimy stripes of duct tape on the tables. Some had nameplates, but most just had their names scrawled on a sheet of white notebook paper. Most of the reporters were also white. Every nook and cranny was stuffed with legal papers, newspapers, telephones and dilapidated computers, while pictures with crude captions and inside jokes covered the walls. At each end of the room were mounted two TV monitors, one for the courtroom feed that anyone could watch on Court TV, and the other for the "ELMO" that projected exhibits onto a screen in the courtroom, and which the reporters called "the evidence channel."

Matt peeled a banana, called his office to map out the day's logistics, and introduced me to the journalists as they arrived. One of the first was author Joe McGinniss, who wrote the best-selling true crime book *Fatal Vision*. Another was dapper Dominick Dunne, who was also writing a book, serializing the trial for *Vanity Fair* magazine, and providing expert analysis on the *CBS Evening News*. In walked a man wearing a neck brace, Joe Bosco, a freelancer from New Orleans

who had the dubious distinction of having attended nearly every session of the trial, and who had recently written a kiss-and-tell piece for *Penthouse* called "Notes from Camp O.J." His main claim to fame was authoring *Blood Will Tell*, a book about a different wife murder that relied on DNA testing, using as his main source the man billed as the defense's star witness, forensic scientist Henry Lee.

It was nearing 9 a.m., so Matt and I tromped back past the TV cameras to the elevator and went down to Department 103, Judge Ito's ninth-floor courtroom. After getting scrutinized and scanned again, we stood in the hallway. Suddenly the lawyers for both sides began filing into court. I was being a real looky-loo when I felt a sharp jab on the backs of my ankles and heard a polite but firm, "excuse me." I whirled around and below me, in a smart red dress, matching hat, and wheelchair, was O.J.'s regal mom, Eunice. "I, I'm sorry," I stammered, then scurried back to the press room to watch the trial on TV and observe the media at work.

As usual, the day began with the jury not there, so the lawyers and judge could play legal games that seldom seemed to have much to do with the case. There was a heightened sense of the absurd among the reporters that morning, because the first hour was to be taken up by a defense motion to compel one of their own, Tracie Savage, general assignment reporter for KNBC-TV in Los Angeles, to take the stand and reveal her source for a September 1994 story in which she had reported that investigators had found Nicole's blood on Simpson's sock. If Savage was called to testify about the source, she was expected to invoke California's reporter's shield law and refuse to answer.

The defense claimed the source of the leak was relevant because it came from the LAPD, and showed there was a conspiracy by the police to frame their client. What just about everyone except the jury and home viewers already knew was that Savage was rumored to have been getting her tips from the former public information officer for the LAPD, who had become an assistant chief, and with whom she'd purportedly become more than cozy.

As Judge Ito called court into session, the press room reporters turned to their keyboards. In strolled Michelle Caruso of the *New York Daily News*, who was known as the queen of the O.J. newsroom

for her scoops. On that day she had yet another exclusive alleging one of Simpson's lawyers and a personal secretary had removed "wads of hundred dollar bills" from his safe deposit box shortly before the slow-speed chase. Caruso was treated with deference by her peers, who complimented her on her story with barely concealed lust for her sources. And like a diva, as most of the reporters began taking notes on the attorney's arguments over whether Savage should testify, Caruso casually applied nail polish and lipstick. When I turned around to introduce myself to her, I was greeted with a harsh chorus of "shhhs" from the other reporters, and shrank in embarrassment again.

Eventually, Ito ruled that Savage could be called to the stand, but outside the jury's presence, "and if she invokes the shield law and indicates that even if the Court finds her in contempt that she will not reveal those sources, then the Court will go into the other issues," i.e., whether she should spend the night in jail. During a short recess the reporters began to put together their a.m. stories. To my amazement, one of the people who had shushed me, Mike Fleeman of the Associated Press, was already filing his.

Ito's ruling that a reporter would have to testify sent shivers through the press room. While a good story, the consensus was that Savage was yet another sideshow in the Simpson trial, and a personal payback by the judge, who had been so furious with the police and media for revealing the sock evidence that he'd threatened to pull the plug on TV coverage. Many thought Ito wanted Savage on the stand just to watch her squirm as he teased her with the threat of contempt, but meantime, the jury continued to languish.

Savage, whose professional credits included a role in the 3-D sequel to *Friday the 13th*, was cool and composed on the witness stand. When Simpson attorney Gerald Uelmen asked if her sources were in the Los Angeles Police Department, she dutifully asserted the shield law. Ito said he would take the matter under submission and allowed Savage to leave, which brought a sigh of relief from the reporters, and left them with a nice tidy story for the morning session. But just as Ito was about to call for the jury, Simpson attorney Robert Shapiro interrupted: "Your Honor, we do have one other witness who will be brief on this issue … Joseph Bosco."

The reporters in the press room groaned as the court camera swung around to show Bosco sitting in the gallery, in neck brace and rumpled suit, looking like the proverbial deer in the headlights. Shapiro asserted Bosco would testify that like Savage, he'd received similar leaks from the police, and "that he has been assigned a permanent seat by Your Honor in the courtroom to cover this case."

Ito couldn't resist needling Bosco, whose *Penthouse* story had, in addition to alleging a "sieve" of leaks from both sides, disparaged the bailiffs, who were under the judge's jurisdiction. "That is a misnomer," Ito corrected Shapiro. "It is a regular seat. There is nothing permanent about it." As the camera bored in on Bosco, Ito asked him if he had a lawyer.

"Your Honor, I've been through this down in New Orleans and I have counsel down there," Bosco stammered. "He may holler at me but I think I know the issue well enough to take the stand."

McGinnis, who was sitting in front of Bosco, turned around. On the courtroom camera his lips could plainly be read: "Get a lawyer." (When I asked McGinnis to confirm this later, he responded, "What I said was, 'get a *fucking* lawyer.'")

Recognizing the seriousness of the situation, Bosco added, "It might be nice that I call him. Maybe my mother will do so watching the television, I don't know, or my wife, I don't know, but whatever your wish is, sir."

While the reporters had approved of Savage's performance on the stand, they seemed to turn on Bosco. "He's calling for his mom," one hooted.

I rushed down to the ninth floor outside the courtroom to see Bosco spinning around like a bad imitation of Ed Sullivan. Some of the reporters got comments from Savage while others followed Bosco to a nearby pay phone, where he called his lawyer's office. "I ain't going to jail," Bosco sputtered into the phone. After listening for a moment he added, "I won't talk. I won't say anything. Gotta go. Gotta get back into court."

I returned to the press room in time to hear Bill Boyarsky, *L.A. Times* columnist, announce "the hell with Savage, I'm going with Bosco." I watched his computer screen as he wrote his lead, which told how Bosco had separated his shoulder in an altercation over

the O.J. case at an after-hours bar, and cracked his neck diving into author McGinnis' pool. Now, Boyarsky noted, the hapless writer was getting knocked around Judge Ito's courtroom. But as he wrote his story, the in-court story took yet another turn.

With the jury still cooling its heels, long-winded defense attorney Peter Neufeld wanted Ito to clarify an issue regarding the bloody gloves. Photos of O.J. wearing Isotoner gloves on ABC's *Monday Night Football* had been all over the media, but the prosecution hadn't shown them to the jury during direct examination. Neufeld wanted Ito to rule that if his blood spatter expert, Professor Herbert MacDonell, testified about a glove-drying experiment he had conducted, prosecutors couldn't use the pictures during their cross-examination. Ito had tentatively ruled the pictures would be prejudicial unless the prosecution could prove they were the same gloves that were in evidence, but Neufeld wanted to make double sure.

The judge seemed bemused. "All right," he said to Clark. "Can you establish a foundation that those gloves are the same gloves?"

Smiling like a Cheshire cat, Clark responded, "Yes, I can."

There was a pause. "Interesting," Ito rejoined.

The bloody gloves — especially the one behind Simpson's home — had been problematic ever since Detective Fuhrman testified that he had been the one to find them, and they became emblematic after prosecutor Christopher Darden dared Simpson to try them on over protective latex gloves, and they didn't seem to fit. The defense claimed that proved the gloves weren't Simpson's, and as Cochran so famously said in his closing argument, "if it doesn't fit, you must acquit."

Prosecutors had tried to clean up their blunder by suggesting the gloves may have shrunk when the blood dried, but Neufeld wouldn't let even that pass, and wanted MacDonell to testify about the shrinkage factor in leather gloves. But when Neufeld couldn't get a ruling on the gloves, he decided to focus on the socks instead. At issue was a drop of blood found on a sock in Simpson's bedroom that had DNA from both O.J. and Nicole — and that had raised the judge's ire when the LAPD lab results were leaked to TV reporter Tracie Savage. The prosecution claimed blood had "splattered" on the sock during the attack, while the defense alleged it could have been "smeared" on the

sock by Detective Fuhrman.

Around 11 a.m., the jury was finally trotted out — although I couldn't see them from my seat in the press room — and MacDonell returned to the witness stand. Under obtuse questioning by Neufeld, MacDonell said the blood stain found on Simpson's sock was a "compression transfer," not a "spatter," suggesting someone could have dabbed or smeared it on the sock after the murders. But when Neufeld tried to get MacDonell to explain why the blood could not have seeped into the other side of the sock if Simpson's foot had been in it, he was frustrated at every turn by Clark's objections. Eventually, Ito put Neufeld and the jury out of their misery by recessing for lunch.

After checking in with his office, Matt took me to the courthouse cafeteria, where we ate with Dominick Dunne, who was fuming as we watched the defense attorneys conferring with their witness at another table. He thought the judge had allowed the trial to get off track. Dunne had been up and down in Hollywood, and had made a comeback as a real crime writer and *bon vivant* for *Vanity Fair*. He viewed the trial from the perspective of a father whose own daughter had been killed by an abusive boyfriend in 1982. In that case, a jury convicted the boyfriend of voluntary manslaughter, but not murder, and he served less than three years in prison.

Dunne had written about the Claus von Bülow trials in the 1980s and was still raw from covering the 1993 Menendez brothers trial, another international sensation that had been televised on Court TV. Lyle and Erik Menendez admitted that as teenagers they'd shotgunned their wealthy parents to death in their Beverly Hills home, but their attorneys played the child abuse card and put the victims on trial, claiming they'd physically and sexually abused their sons for years. Even though there was no physical evidence of child abuse, neither of two juries (one for each brother) were able to reach a verdict. (In the 1996 retrial they were convicted and sentenced to life in prison.) Dunne's scathing critique of the trial for *Vanity Fair* had sparked a public spat with Menendez defense attorney Leslie Abramson, and a private rift with his brother, screenwriter John Gregory Dunne, and his wife, journalist Joan Didion, who were friends with Abramson and her husband. (Dunne died of cancer in 2009 at age 83, six years

after his brother passed away.)

The N-word

When Matt and I returned to our seats in the courtroom and press room respectively, the jury was once again absent and missed an impassioned appeal by Johnnie Cochran for Ito to urge a North Carolina judge to release the so-called Fuhrman tapes. Ito declined to issue a writ, but the recently revealed tapes were looming over the case.

At the preliminary hearing in July 1994, a calm and confident Fuhrman had testified on the single most incriminating piece of prosecution evidence — that he found a bloody glove at the crime scene, and another behind Simpson's compound. A lawyer in another case, who was seeking damages against the LAPD for allegedly shooting a black suspect and planting evidence against him, was watching the hearing on TV and realized that Fuhrman was one of the officers implicated in his case. The lawyer called Robert Shapiro, who was then Simpson's lead attorney, and told him that in 1981, the detective had applied for a stress disability pension and had told a psychiatrist he'd tortured suspects and hated "niggers." The city denied Fuhrman's request, claiming he was faking his stress, but when the detective appealed the denial, which was also turned down, the internal psychiatric report in which Fuhrman had made the statements became a public record.

The defense leaked the information to legal analyst Jeffrey Toobin, who was writing for *The New Yorker*, which published a story saying Simpson's lawyers were planning to attack Fuhrman's credibility by accusing him of being a rogue cop who planted the glove because he was a racist. The article also reported that Simpson's defense team was going to add a prominent African American attorney, Johnnie Cochran, who specialized in police misconduct cases and was known for playing the race card.

Toobin called the tactic "incendiary" and predicted it might ignite riots, and Fuhrman threatened to sue the magazine for $50 million, claiming he'd been defamed. But other media outlets were reporting

similar information, and one night Kathleen Bell, a blond real estate agent from Long Beach, was watching the news and thinking how "ridiculous" it was that the defense was playing the race card, when she looked up at her TV and realized she had met the cop in question about 10 years ago, at a Marine recruiting station beneath her Redondo Beach office.

In a letter she wrote to Cochran, she said "Ferman" once told her that when he sees a "nigger" driving with a white woman, he would pull them over, and if he didn't have a reason, he would find one. She said he also said he would like nothing more than to see all "niggers" gathered together and killed, and "something about burning them or bombing them."

Bell told her story to Larry King on CNN and other media outlets, and was vilified as an O.J. groupie, gold digger, or what today might be called a Real Housewife of Orange County. Ito had made an early ruling that Fuhrman's racist statement in the 1981 psychiatric report was too distant in time to be relevant to the case, and that unless the defense provided evidence that Fuhrman planted the glove, any evidence about his racial attitudes was irrelevant. But in January 1995, the judge ruled that Bell could testify, noting that what the witness was alleging was a "unique combination of racial animus, interracial couples and a willingness to fabricate."

Ito's ruling, along with the prosecution's subsequent decision to let Fuhrman testify anyway, was a turning point in the case, both inside and outside the courtroom. As Ronald Goldman's anguished father, Fred, later observed at a courthouse news conference, "This is now the Fuhrman trial ... the defense has got the trial so far off base, it's pitiable ... To let them get away with this is murderous in itself."

Although Fuhrman had been cool and convincing at the preliminary hearing, when it came time for him to testify at the trial in March 1995, circumstances had changed dramatically. In addition to testifying about the gloves, he'd be asked about the n-word by none other than legal legend F. Lee Bailey. Prosecutor Marcia Clark tried to steal Bailey's thunder by putting the offensive statements Bell had alleged on the ELMO for the jury to see. Treating it as a he-said-she-said situation, the detective used the deny, deny, deny defense, repeatedly stating he'd never met Bell nor made the statements. Under Bailey's

bellicose cross-examination, Fuhrman continued to deny, deny, deny, even when Bailey said the defense had two other witnesses to corroborate what Bell had alleged. And by the time Bailey was finished with him, Fuhrman had affirmed under oath that he had not spoken the n-word in 10 years.

In legal parlance, that is known as opening the door, and in the court of public opinion, it's known as a gotcha moment. A private detective hired by Simpson's defense team had found out that a professor at the North Carolina School of Art, Laura Hart McKinney, had 12 hours of taped interviews with Fuhrman, spanning the past 10 years, in which he'd used the n-word 41 times. The recordings had been made when the aspiring screenwriter was in Los Angeles, working on a script about racism and sexism in the LAPD. No matter that Fuhrman's rants could be construed as locker room trash talk, or that he maintained he'd been role-playing. In addition to using the n-word, there were 18 instances in which he'd boasted about police misconduct, including beating suspects and planting evidence.

As I watched from the press room, Cochran told Judge Ito that since Fuhrman had denied using the racial epithet, the tapes were evidence that the detective had lied under oath, and if he lied about the n-word, he could be lying about finding the glove. *The New York Times* reporter David Margolick quietly got on the phone with someone who seemed to be a representative for McKinney. From what I could tell, Margolick was unsuccessful in getting either an interview or the tapes, since he ended the conversation with a request to "think about it" and get back to him.

As always, the jurors missed the fireworks, but were brought in for the resumption of Neufeld's direct examination of spatter mavin MacDonell. Clark continued to launch objections, but at last Neufeld was able to ask whether the blood stain on the sock was consistent with someone dabbing the sock with blood when it was not being worn by Simpson, and MacDonell was able to answer "yes."

Next it was Marcia Clark's turn. The fiery lead prosecutor began by berating the witness over alleged conflicting testimony regarding whether the stain had been made by a compression or a swipe, whether MacDonell had ever examined a hole cut out of the sock, and other minutiae. Suddenly she switched gears, brandishing photos

of the crime scene. "And would you agree with me, sir, that it was a very bloody crime scene?" she asked.

"It was an extremely bloody crime scene," MacDonell responded. "I've seen several that were bloodier so to speak, but there was a great abundance of blood, yes."

Continuing her ping-pong approach to the witness, Clark asked about phenolphthalein tests, fuzz balls and the difference between a swipe and a compression until everyone was ready to plotz, then turned again to the crime scene photos, asking the witness if there was some other way the blood could have been smeared on the sock: "And let me ask you this, sir. If someone, wearing the socks that you saw, were to step near to the body of the victim, Nicole Brown Simpson, near enough for the ankle bone to come in contact with her bloody hand, could that cause a compression transfer?"

"Certainly," MacDonell conceded.

"Could it also cause a swipe?"

"Yes."

"And if she were to reach a bloody hand out and touch her thumb or finger or hand to the ankle of Mr. Simpson wearing those socks, could that cause a compression or a swipe?"

When Neufeld objected, Ito gave Clark the chance to rephrase the question. Taking a deep breath and speaking slowly, she did: "If Nicole Brown Simpson reached out a bloody hand to touch the ankle of the murderer wearing those socks, could that cause a compression or a swipe transfer?"

"Certainly," MacDonell said.

Clark then began asking questions about the effect sweaty feet might have on the socks and the quality of MacDonell's professional credentials, essentially going into a stalling mode until 4 p.m., which is when testimony ended for the day.

Soon the reporters burst into the press room, expending what energy they had left to finish their evening deadline stories. Deciding on the story du jour could be a tricky proposition. A reporter didn't want to have the same story as everyone else; then again, being all alone with a different slant might mean the reporter missed the real story of the day. So sometimes some subtle lobbying went on.

Matt arrived and told me loud enough for others to hear that he

was going to lead his story with the prosecution's chilling image of a dying Nicole possibly reaching out and touching the ankle of her killer. When I said he was picking out the most sensational moment, he noted that it was the only testimony the entire day that had anything to do with the murders of Nicole Brown Simpson and Ron Goldman. "I always like to lead with the victims if I can," he said. "Just to remind people what this trial is really about."

I'm not saying our discussion had any effect on what anyone else wrote, but after all was said and done, the top of Fleeman's AP evening story got changed from the Fuhrman tapes to the victim's bloody hand.

Seat in the Courtroom

Tuesday, Aug. 1, was my last chance to achieve my ultimate goal — a seat in the courtroom and a peek at the jury. Matt agreed to get up before dawn to get me to the courthouse by 7 a.m., because a seat in Judge Ito's courtroom was not an easy ticket.

The gallery was comprised of four rows of wooden benches and a few metal folding chairs, with a maximum capacity of 80 spectators. The Brown, Goldman and Simpson families had seats, as did many of the news services, including Matt's. The lawyers had seats for their consultants, while another section was taken up by what were known as "FOIs," or Friends of Ito. These included friends and family of the judge, visiting dignitaries and, periodically, Geraldo Rivera. What was left for the hundreds of daily looky-loos were seven measly seats divvied up by lottery every morning. Naturally I didn't win the lottery, so it was time for plan B.

Shortly before 9 a.m. each morning, Ito's press secretary, Jerrianne Hayslett, dropped by to pass out the daily seat assignments to the media. Crowded into the cramped hallway outside the press room to receive their daily ration of press passes — the number of which fluctuated depending on how many FOIs there were — was both a demeaning and anxious moment for the reporters. In addition to the regulars, there were always a few "special requests" (I was hardly the first to use this ploy) that required toadying up to the press secretary.

Rather than asking for a favor, Matt introduced me to Hayslett as a "freelancer from Illinois," and requested that she get me on the media list. Hayslett said all the press seats were taken, but one of the FOIs, a visiting journalist from Russia, might not be staying the entire day. She said she'd put me first on the judge's list in case the Russian lady left.

In the press room, groggy reporters were gearing up for another day. Boyarsky was bemoaning an error he'd made in his Bosco story, while a reporter for *USA Today* was lamenting having reported that Clark said the gloves in the sportscast video were "similar to" rather than "the same" gloves that had been used in the murders. Taking Matt's seat, I watched court begin on TV, sans jury as usual, with a circumspect Johnnie Cochran also agonizing over the gloves. Seeking a "clarification," he noted that "some media" had reported that Clark had been misquoted regarding the gloves.

But Clark was not in a clarifying mood. "What the *L.A. Times* thinks I said, or any other reporter, makes no difference to me … I don't think there is any misunderstanding between the Court and myself or counsel, and I don't think any further clarification is required."

Next, the mini-trial within the trial on the bloody sock media leak continued with another evidentiary 402 hearing. The defense wanted to call the director of the LAPD lab, Michele Kestler, to testify about who could have leaked DNA test results. But as with Savage and Bosco, Ito wanted to preview the testimony to decide if it was relevant. Kestler had learned the art of never answering a question with a simple "yes" or "no," which along with prosecutor Hank Goldberg's whiny objections, made plodding Neufeld's inquiry even more laborious. Kestler also liked to snort into the microphone and smirk like she shouldn't have to be there, which, in fact, she shouldn't.

When the attorneys were done with Kestler, Ito called for a 10-minute recess, after which the jury would finally be brought in. I dashed down to the ninth floor with a sense of urgency. It looked like the jurors wouldn't be in court much that day, and I sorely wanted to get a look at them. I approached one of the bailiffs at the metal detector, identified myself as a "freelance reporter," and asked if a seat had opened up in the courtroom. When he began to explain the morning

lottery routine, I blurted, "and Jerrianne Hayslett left my name first on the list." The bailiff gave me a look of "what list?" and said the press secretary would have to personally vouch for me.

As I madly looked around for Hayslett, a second bailiff, who had heard only the end of our conversation, looked up. "What is your name?" she asked. When I told her, she looked down at a clipboard, and son of a gun, there was my name. "Ms. Hayslett left your name here, but I didn't know you were supposed to go in now …" she trailed off as she went in search of the Russian lady, who was expecting to go back into court. My heart pounded as I watched the uniformed bailiff approach a nice looking woman with limited English skills, apologize briefly, and take a little orange laminated card from her. I tried to be nonchalant as the bailiff handed me the pass. Thankfully, court was soon called into session, so I didn't have to stand in the hallway feeling guilty. As we filed in, Matt snuck up behind me and squeezed my shoulder. I'd made it to the big show, as a Friend of Ito, no less.

Entering the courtroom was both exhilarating and sobering. After all, this was a murder trial, not a rock concert. Besides, armed bailiffs were everywhere, and they weren't just going to shush me if I made a disturbance. The posted rules were succinct — no talking, no gum. In fact, about the only activity allowed was note-taking. C1, my seat, a folding chair, was considered the worst seat in the house. There was a row D against the back wall, but C1 was the farthest from the jury, and the view of the defense table and O.J. Simpson was partially obscured by a glass partition. But I wasn't complaining. It was 10:15 a.m. and I was in.

Suddenly the attorneys came striding by. I know it's sexist, but my first impression of Marcia Clark was basically, "what a babe." Johnnie Cochran was also striking, but surprisingly short — perhaps an inch shorter than Clark in heels.

From a door in front of the glass partition, bailiffs brought in O.J. Simpson, who appeared even bigger in person. Football may have blown out his knees, but one look at his back and arm muscles rippling his suit coat, his thick neck and sculptured head, erased any doubt as to whether he had the physical wherewithal to brutally stab to death his skinny ex-wife and a Jewish waiter. Even after a year

behind bars, the 48-year-old Hall of Famer appeared to be in game shape.

What little rustling there was stopped as a door at the front of the room opened and Judge Ito slinked into court. “Back on the record in the Simpson matter,” he mumbled, staring at what would have been his feet if his desk wasn’t there. “Deputy Magnera, let’s have the jurors, please.”

As the official court transcript notes, there was a “brief pause.” Then, from a door beneath the TV camera, in shuffled the 14 survivors of the once 24-member jury panel. They included a two white women, a Hispanic man, a black man and seven black women, plus two alternates — an older black man and a young white woman. Fourteen of the most average looking people I’d ever seen. But also 14 of the blankest faces. They were about to eclipse the sequestration endurance record for American jurisprudence, and looked it.

Stoically, they entered the courtroom and took their seats. They responded with a hearty “good morning” to Judge Ito’s greeting, but then seemed to sink into a catatonic stupor, aware of their surroundings but seldom twitching except to jot something into a notebook. After more than seven months of isolation and stop-and-go testimony, they appeared shell shocked, like hostages or prisoners of war. Given the responsibility of deciding the fate of a black celebrity charged with double murder in the trial of the century, they themselves had been under constant scrutiny by the judge, prosecutors, defense attorneys and the media. Their vacant demeanors appeared to be part exhaustion and part self-preservation, as Ito had dismissed nearly half the original panel for one alleged infraction or another.

Another explanation for their lethargy was that much of the testimony was incredibly boring. On this day they would have to endure the continued cross examination of blood spatter expert Herbert MacDonell by prosecutor Marcia Clark, who began with an attack on the witness’ credibility. Noting he was the director of a crime lab, she sarcastically asked, “How is your commute?”

“I commute by going from the upper level to the lower level,” MacDonell responded.

“So your laboratory is in the lower level of your home; is that correct, sir?”

"That's correct."

Using the same technique as the previous day, Clark pinged to the microscopic blood balls on the sock, then ponged to the was-it-a-swipe-or-a-compression debate. MacDonell surrendered. "Any term you like I will agree with," he said.

At last, Clark returned to the one effective part of her examination. "Then you would agree, sir, that it would be more probable that it would be the thumb or bloody hand of Nicole Brown that could have come in contact with the sock to create that compression stain; is that correct?"

From across the gallery, Matt leaned back in his seat and flashed a quick smile at me, enjoying Clark highlighting the part of the testimony he'd led yesterday's story with.

In Neufeld's redirect, no stone was too small for him to unturn, so he asked MacDonell to again clarify the difference between a swipe, a compression and a spatter, and to bolster his credentials (he'd once received a J. Edgar Hoover Award). Then Neufeld attempted to deal with the bloody thumb theory, and MacDonell tried to sneak in the blood drying experiment, saying the stain could have occurred at the crime scene, but not some tiny blood balls on the other side of the sock, because Bundy was at least six minutes away from Simpson's home.

Clark objected and asked to approach the bench. "Sustained. Sustained," Ito waved her off.

Again Neufeld asked MacDonell to explain why the little blood balls could not have occurred at Bundy, and again MacDonell hinted at the blood-drying time test.

Clark went ballistic: "Objection, objection, objection."

Judge Ito had the jury leave the courtroom and called for a sidebar. "What was that about?" he asked after the jury had left.

With MacDonell looking on, Neufeld apologized and said he had expected the witness to give a different answer — that blood could not have spread from one inside surface of the sock to the other during the murders because someone's foot had been in the sock.

Clark was still livid: "This is the fourth time counsel has elicited that response from the witness." She also wanted the foot-in-the-sock theory disallowed. "We were never informed of the second reason,

your honor. This is a new one to me."

But Ito said it was just common sense that the stain could not have spread if there was a foot in the sock. "Even I understand that," he said.

The jury returned and Neufeld tried one more time: "Professor MacDonell, based on your observations of surface 1, surface 2 and surface 3 of the sock in question, is it your opinion that the staining of that sock could have happened at the Bundy crime scene?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"If there was a foot or an ankle in the sock it could not transfer from surface 2 to 3."

Neufeld had MacDonell repeat his "theory" again, and after Clark's recross and Neufeld's re-redirect, the morning session drew to a close.

I was on my own for the afternoon because the story du jour was out of court. More than 200 pages of transcripts had been released revealing why various jurors had been dismissed. Matt would spend the rest of the day at his main office in the County Building a block away, reading the transcripts and writing that story, while monitoring the in-court proceedings on TV.

On tap for the jury that afternoon was testimony that could only be called "surreal," which is, in fact, what Matt later called it in his story. Because Judge Ito had yet to rule on whether Savage, Bosco and Kestler would testify in front of the jury, the only "witness" the defense had ready was the testimony of Thano Peratis, the nurse who had drawn a blood sample from O.J. At both the grand jury and preliminary hearings, Peratis had said he had drawn approximately eight milliliters of Simpson's blood. But later audits of the evidence found slightly less blood, and the defense wanted to argue that Fuhrman might have used the missing blood to frame Simpson. Because of health problems, Peratis was unavailable to testify again, so the defense wanted to show the video of the preliminary hearing, then re-enact the grand jury testimony, which had not been taped, by having attorneys read it aloud.

It would only take about 20 minutes, but as seemed to be their strategy with every aspect of the defense's case, prosecutors objected

to the admissibility of the evidence, forcing jurors to wait while arguments were held that included a dress rehearsal of the testimony. Finally, the jury was brought in for a re-enactment of the June 22, 1994, grand jury testimony, with defense attorney Carl Douglas playing Marcia Clark and defense attorney Robert Blasier pretending to be Peratis. The jury watched the spectacle impassively, though some did chuckle when Blasier/Peratis responded to a Douglas/Clark question with "yes ma'am."

Jurors had been in court for about 90 minutes during the morning and less than an hour during the afternoon. Again they were asked to leave the courtroom while the lawyers returned to the Bosco matter. Defense attorney Robert Shapiro said he'd worked out a deal with Bosco's attorney so the journalist would not have to invoke the shield law. He said the defense would not ask the writer to reveal his sources, only to confirm what he had written in his article — that the source of the leak on the bloody sock DNA was a "badged member of the Los Angeles Police Department."

Bosco's mocking article had opined that the defense and prosecution had leaked enough information "to sink Camp O.J. if it were on a barge," but that both were "pikers" compared to the LAPD, which the previous summer had passed out copies of Nicole Brown Simpson's 911 tapes to journalists "as if they were courtesy trinkets welcoming them to town."

The text of Bosco's story was in a defense motion released that morning, which was the first time many of his colleagues had read it. I liked the story, but the reaction of the pool reporters was generally negative. Some felt it was inaccurate while others seemed put off by its gonzo tone. As is often the case, the attitude of the daily reporters toward the "think piece" writers seemed to be like Marines toward the Navy.

As usual, prosecutors objected to the evidence. Goldberg said putting Bosco in front of the jury at that point was trial by "ambush." In his cloying but logical way, he noted Ito had yet to rule on the admissibility of the entire police leak defense, much less conducted an evidentiary hearing with Bosco. Bosco's stand-in attorney also felt ambushed, noting the hearing was to have been held later in the afternoon, when yet another attorney would be present. Realizing

there would be no more testimony, at 3 p.m. a frustrated Ito called for a recess and dismissed the jury for the day.

When I returned to the courtroom 15 minutes later, about half the gallery had left, so a bailiff instructed me to take a better seat, second row center. I was elated, but the ensuing hearing would be excruciating. Once again the prosecution wanted to prevent or restrict the testimony of a defense witness, DNA expert Dr. John Gerdes, who had tested more than 1,000 LAPD lab samples and concluded the lab had a "chronic and substantial contamination problem."

Another of the prosecution's cadre of attorneys, George Clarke, argued that the samples were irrelevant because none were taken when Simpson's DNA had been at the lab. Spunky Barry Scheck for the defense noted that the DNA evidence was central to the prosecution's case, and that the least the defense should be granted was one day for Gerdes to show and tell what he had found there. (In 1992, Scheck and Neufeld co-founded the Innocence Project, which has used DNA evidence to free hundreds of people who were wrongfully convicted, including death row inmates.) In the end, Ito agreed with Scheck on most of his points, including that the defense could complete its presentation of the witness and charts in one day.

Ito called for a 10-minute recess before getting to the day's finale, the Bosco matter. Out in the hallway, Court TV reporter Dan Abrams was apoplectic. "This is so horrible," he complained to no one in particular. "Nobody can shut up or say, 'this isn't important.' I'm going fucking insane … I need a vacation."

Back in court, Ito said he would allow the defense to call Bosco without the jury present to lay a foundation for the evidence in the *Penthouse* article. "All right, is Mr. Bosco available?" he asked.

To my right, I saw Bosco stir and realized he was going to have to walk right by me to get to the witness chair. Because Bosco was still wearing his neck brace, I knew the Court TV camera would be following his every step. As he approached, I stood up and moved into the aisle, giving him more room. When he passed in front of me I thought, "face time," and almost gave him an encouraging pat on the back before realizing that would probably get me thrown out of the courtroom or perhaps shot.

Defense attorney Shapiro started with some easy questions, but

Bosco was a bundle of nerves. His response to "What is your profession, sir?" was, "I'm a full lance — full-time, freelance, author of books and occasionally magazine articles." Warming to his task, Bosco noted he had observed "almost 100 percent" of the trial, and written a book called *Blood Will Tell* "in association with Dr. Henry Lee." Shapiro got Bosco to state that his words were truthful and accurate reporting, and then, keeping his bargain, said "nothing further" and sat down.

Prosecutor Goldberg had not made a deal with Bosco's attorney, and he approached the witness with his customary smirk and cut to the chase: "Sir, will you tell us who the source was of the statement that there had been certain results on the socks?"

Bosco almost muffed his line: "Well, of course, with the — I mean, I must invoke with all due respect the California shield law." Goldberg gave him a second chance, asking whether he'd actually spoken to a police officer, and Bosco did better: "Again, with all due respect to the court, I must invoke the California shield law."

Goldberg began to spar with Bosco over which parts of the paragraph were facts and which were opinions. He read the sentence about there having been enough leaking "to sink Camp O.J. if it were a barge" and asked, "Did you mean that literally, that it would somehow — the weight of the material would sink a barge, or was this an opinion of yours?"

Bosco couldn't help himself: "Well, let me ask you, Mr. Goldberg, do you not agree with that?"

There were stifled titters and groans in the gallery, but none from Judge Ito. "Excuse me. Mr. Bosco, just answer the question, please … And, Mr. Goldberg, let's understand who the audience is for this particular hearing … I recognize opinions and hyperbole when I see it."

Goldberg continued asking about Bosco's sources and Bosco continued invoking the shield law "with all due respect," until the attorney said, "I have nothing further."

Trying to wind things up, Ito thanked Bosco, then told him he was subject to recall.

"I still have a seat, right, your Honor?" Bosco asked, only half jokingly.

It had been a long and taxing day, but Goldberg revisited at length his "multi-pronged argument as to why this type of testimony should not be allowed." Ito did not respond to Goldberg at the time, but later ruled the LAPD leak of the bloody sock DNA results to be irrelevant and inadmissible. "Thank you, counsel," he said when Goldberg finished. "All right. Anything else that we need to take up before we take our recess for the afternoon?"

Johnnie Cochran also had "one last thing, your honor," and then, at 5:10 p.m., it was over. But I wasn't quite ready to give up my fantasy of being a real O.J. Simpson trial reporter. So I returned to the official O.J. Simpson press room and used Matt's phone to call him at his other office. Alas, I had nothing to report that he hadn't seen on TV, except for the non-news that the jury hadn't twitched very much.

Justice in General

Even though I was dog tired, punch drunk and, well, not a real reporter, I staggered down to the lobby, where Bosco had said he would be available to answer questions. When I got there, the writer was being ignored by his colleagues, who were clustered around the story du jour, Francine Florio-Bunten, a white female who'd served on the jury for five months before being the last one to get kicked off May 26.

The newly released transcripts indicated that the juror may have been set up. They revealed that a possibly fraudulent letter from someone claiming to be a literary agent's receptionist had been sent to Ito claiming Florio-Bunten's husband had met with a literary agent, and that she was writing a book called *Standing Alone – A Vote For Nicole*. Ito never investigated the letter, but he interviewed all the jurors individually, asking them if anyone was writing a book, and during that process, another juror scribbled a note on a scrap of newspaper and gave it to Florio-Bunten, attempting to let her know what the interviews were about. Another juror told Ito about the note, and when Florio-Bunten told Ito she hadn't received the note, he dismissed her for lying to him.

Not that there were any racial considerations, but in addition to

Florio-Bunten, the defense had successfully gotten another white female, a white male and two Latinas dismissed, while the prosecution had four jurors tossed off the jury — three black males and a black female. In addition, a 26-year-old black female flight attendant was allowed to leave after she told Ito she "couldn't take it anymore." She later posed for *Playboy*.

As I walked up to the live televised news conference, Florio-Bunten was saying she was glad she'd asked for the transcripts to be made public because they vindicated her and provided a sense of "closure." The reporters were firing questions at her and I couldn't resist trying to get one in. When I saw my chance I piped up, "From your experience on the jury, what do you think about the justice system in general?"

Fleeman of the AP turned around and scowled at me, because I wasn't a real reporter. But Florio-Bunten didn't know I was just a looky-loo and began answering. According to my scribbles, what she said was, "I think the justice system is wonderful. Great. But for me, as a juror, it didn't work for me. I think O.J. is getting a fair trial. But you have to have trust in the jurors to do the right thing. Once you lose that trust the whole thing falls apart."

I was elated when the next reporter asked a follow-up question that began with the transition, "Along the same lines …"

I was also pleased that in Fleeman's subsequent AP story, he quoted Florio-Bunten thusly: "I think you have to have trust in your jurors … and when you lose trust, then the whole system falls apart."

My 48 hours at Camp O.J. were over. I trotted up the street to the County Building, where Matt was eager to go home. He had already finished his story and was waiting for an editor to sign off on it. Nevertheless, I read him my Florio-Bunten quote. Matt was polite, but said he'd seen the news conference on TV and hadn't heard anything quotable enough to insert into his story.

The rest, as they say, is history. After I returned to Springfield, Judge Ito decided to let the jury see two excerpts from the Fuhrman tapes that included the n-word. Even though he noted "the underlying assumption that Fuhrman planted the Rockingham glove for the purpose of incriminating Simpson … required a leap in both logic and law too broad to be made based on the evidence before the jury,"

Fuhrman had lied about using the n-word, and the judge felt obliged to let the jury know that the detective had perjured himself.

Ito, the son of Japanese American teachers who had been interned during World War II, was less concerned about the n-word than the things Fuhrman had said about torturing suspects and planting evidence. Saying he did not want to be accused of "suppressing information of vital public interest," the judge allowed the defense to play all 61 excerpts it had submitted, outside the jury's presence, but in open court, where it was broadcast around the world.

Fuhrman had become the face of racism in America. Even prosecutor Clark told the jury he was "the worst the LAPD has to offer." But an FBI probe and an internal investigation by the department later found little evidence that Fuhrman had committed any of the criminal acts he'd bragged about on the tapes. He eventually pleaded no contest to perjury and was given probation and a fine of $200.

In his closing argument, Cochran compared Fuhrman to Hitler, calling him a "lying, genocidal, racist cop." He said a verdict of not guilty would not only exonerate Simpson, but send a message to the police who had covered up for the detective, and to prosecutors who wanted to win at any cost. "You are empowered to say this is wrong," he told jurors. "Stop this cover-up! Stop this cover-up!"

After being sequestered for 265 days, it took the jury less than four hours to find Simpson not guilty.

In February 1997, a civil jury in Santa Monica found Simpson liable for the wrongful death of Ron Goldman, and O.J. was ordered to pay the Goldman family $33.5 million. His NFL pension and Miami home could not be touched, but Fred Goldman became obsessed with seizing Simpson's other assets. His dogged determination paid off in September 2007, when a cash-strapped O.J. tried to get some of his memorabilia back by robbing a collector in a Las Vegas casino hotel room. On Oct. 3, 2008, exactly 13 years after Orenthal James Simpson was acquitted of murder, he was found guilty of armed robbery and other charges. Simpson was sentenced to 33 years in prison, and will become eligible for parole in 2017.

Part 2
City News Daze

When Princess Di's funeral procession began in London on Sept. 6, 1997, it was shortly after 1 a.m. in Los Angeles, and I was laughing inappropriately as a discombobulated Dan Rather solemnly intoned the route of the funeral "corsage." An animated computer graphic popped up that looked like it had been borrowed from CBS Sports, only instead of a golf course, it showed the path of the cortège, and rather than fairways and bunkers, there was an icon for Hyde Park, then a dogleg to the left, Westminster Abbey. For the first time in a long time I was following the news — and how it was being reported — with more than a spectator's interest. Hours earlier I'd been hired for my first serious journalism job in a decade, and it was a doozy.

Over the past eight years I'd been writing propaganda for a state agency in Springfield, Illinois. As I noted in *Blackspanic College*, my memoir about teaching at a college in South-Central Los Angeles, "I was ripe for a midlife crisis. In my mid-40s, single, no kids, stuck in a dead-end job in a no-fun town, no prospects and nowhere to go. Oh that magic feeling."

So I moved to Los Angeles and tried to rekindle my writing career. I got a six-month job at the American Film Institute, where I worked on special projects and took a couple of screenwriting classes. I also began writing columns about cyberspace and pop culture for a Burbank-based alternative weekly called *Entertainment Today*. I'd email the columns to alternative weeklies around the country in hopes of selling them, and I posted them on my website, Lost in Cyberspace, making me a blogger before it became fashionable.

Then my friend Matt Krasnowski, who worked at Copley News Service and had helped me sneak into the O.J. Simpson trial of the century, told me City News Service was looking for reporters and copy editors. Like most people, I'd never heard of City News. A *Los Angeles Times* profile in October 1997 described CNS as "the guilty secret of L.A.'s press corps, whose jobs would be much tougher were it not there acting as a tip sheet, clearinghouse and safety net."

The *Times* noted that, "before Angelenos ever see them in the

newspaper or on the evening news, many of the sad and sensational stories the city serves up each day pass first through the hands of the comparatively low-paid and often improbably young staffers at City News. CNS subscribers, which include The Times, CNN, 'Hard Copy,' the Wall Street Journal and every local TV station, receive CNS' prodigious daily output simultaneously via computer and then use it to supplement and sometimes supplant their own coverage. Whether alerting editors that a Chihuahua-eating pet python will be available for a photo op or that a celebrity witness is about to take the stand, CNS plays a huge unsung role in setting the agenda for what makes news in Southern California."

From Matt's description, CNS sounded like a fast-paced, high-pressure place to work, where nuts and bolts journalists covered everything, without adjectives. It was something I wasn't qualified for and didn't particularly think I wanted. I'm not exactly a fast-pace, high-pressure kind of a guy. I don't like covering everything and I do like adjectives. But having the chance to go from flacking on the prairie to "setting the agenda for what makes news in Southern California" was too preposterous an opportunity to pass up.

I wrote a cheeky cover letter saying I'd heard CNS was so desperate for reporters and copy editors that they might even consider "an old warhorse like me." To my astonishment, I was right. Days later I put on a sport coat and tie and headed for a job interview at a hi-rise in swanky Century City, adjacent to Beverly Hills. Bemusement became intimidation as I approached the Batmanesque skyline and found myself cowering before one of those super sleek edifices.

I took an elevator to the 18th floor, where I ducked into a restroom to take a nervous whiz and rinse my sweaty palms. Looking in the mirror, I thought about bolting. Instead, I walked to the end of the hall, where a heavy wooden door with a peephole led to the CNS newsroom. The door was opened by a man dressed like me, sans tie and sport coat. He introduced himself as the managing editor and ushered me into his side office, which had a panoramic view of downtown L.A. He said he'd be with me in a moment and went back to his computer terminal in the newsroom.

As I gazed out the window, behind me I could hear him bawling out a reporter on the phone. Again, I thought about bolting. But as the

minutes passed, I turned around and timidly stood at his office door, gazing at stories on whining, dot-matrix printers, and at six boxy TVs perched atop a row of filing cabinets that ran the length of the room. Each TV was tuned to a different newscast, but they were all showing the same photo of the "People's Princess," who days earlier had died in a car crash in Paris while fleeing paparazzi with her boyfriend. As intimidating as it had been from the outside, on the inside, CNS looked like any other newsroom — old desks jammed together, computer monitors, newspapers and wire copy stacked everywhere, and with overworked editors snapping at each other.

Eventually the editor returned to his office, ostensibly to interview me, but I couldn't get a word in edgewise. A half-hour later he had yet to ask me a question. "*Post-Dispatch*, that's a good paper," he said, glancing at my resume. I tried to tell him what I did for the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, but he preferred to tell me about a newspaper in Post, Texas, called *The Dispatch*. Once the "interview" was over, he said he wanted to hire me, but the only opening was for an overnight editor on weekends. He said I'd be the only one in the office, and all the bureaus would be closed except for the police beat. "It's really dead," he said. "You wouldn't consider something like that, would you?"

It was, in fact, the only job at City News I felt remotely capable of handling. I'd been out of the news business for more than eight years, and the last time I'd been an editor was in college. Over the next week I got two days of cursory training during the day shift, and tried to memorize the arcane codes that told the computer where to send the stories. At 11 p.m. that Friday, I returned to Century City feeling very shaky. The editor showed me how to "open the wire," which meant sending a midnight message to all the clients announcing who would be in charge for the next three shifts, the first being, improbably, me. He showed me how to re-thread the perforated, continuous-page printer paper, wished me luck, and then he left.

Suddenly I was alone. For some reason, the first thing that popped into my mind was Linda Ellerbee, a network TV news reporter and author who once got fired from the Associated Press for using an AP computer to write a friend a snide letter that accidentally got transmitted to every major news outlet in the world. I settled into the

“slot” — the desk facing all the other desks, where the main editor sits — and savored the moment. The editor had said it would be dead, and a half hour later I was still staring at the printer, waiting for a story to pop up so I could spring into action. Then I realized that when the editor showed me how to change the paper on the printer, I’d forgotten to turn it back on ...

On that inauspicious note, my nearly 15-year association with City News began. I worked the weekend overnight shift for a year, left to teach journalism for a few years, then returned as the weekend and holiday night editor, from 4 p.m. to midnight, plus two day shifts a week, until I left in 2011. It was indeed a fast-paced, high-pressure job, but also the coolest one I ever had.

CNS was and is a wire service, an anachronistic term from the time the first news agencies, like Associated Press and Reuters, used Morse code over a telegraph wire to transmit stories to newspapers. Wire services are news wholesalers — instead of providing information directly to the public, their words, pictures, audio and video are sold to print, broadcast and other retail media clients. Although CNS has a website, you can’t see its stories without paying a hefty subscriber fee.

The big wire services have bureaus throughout the world. CNS is among a dwindling number of smaller news agencies that focus on local news coverage. There are also wire services that specialize in business or entertainment news, and some that don’t provide news per se, but disseminate company press releases, like PR Newswire, or act as the mouthpiece for a regime, like the Telegraph Agency of the Soviet Union (TASS, which in 1992 became the Information Telegraph Agency of Russia).

City News generates news 24/7. It has been around since 1928 and over the years expanded its coverage from Los Angeles to Orange, San Diego and Riverside counties, with beat reporters at offices in or near police departments, courthouses and city halls. Before I began working for CNS in the fall of 1997, its main office was in Hollywood, and before I left in the spring of 2011, it had moved farther west from Century City to another skyscraper near Santa Monica.

CNS didn’t traffic in photos, audio or video, but had three kinds of print products — budgets, advisories and news stories — each

written in a different tense. The daily and weekly budgets, written in future tense, were voluminous lists of court cases, public meetings, news conferences, conventions and events related to the entertainment industry, which the *Times* called a "vital cog in the local news-making machinery." I called it the franchise because it was the main reason many of the clients subscribed.

Written in present tense, advisories were brief alerts to breaking news, and came in four flavors. If a county fire dispatcher told the police reporter that a wildfire had broken out near Malibu, before a story was written, a one-sentence "advisory" would be sent saying "firefighters are battling a blaze near Malibu." If someone died in the fire, that might be an "urgent." If Malibu was being evacuated, that could be a "bulletin," and if the big one struck and Malibu slid into the sea, that would rate a "flash."

Coding a transmission as an advisory caused a bell to ring on the printers at all the clients, or for the file to go to the top of the queue on their computer screens. Some advisories were "not for publication," while others got read on the air within seconds of being received, usually without attribution. When a TV or radio newscaster would say "this just in," or "we're hearing that," an editor at CNS would often mutter, "where'd you hear that?" But that's what they paid us for.

News stories were written in past tense, but with few exceptions they were supposed to have the word "today" in the "lede," or first sentence. Each story was assigned a "slug," a two-word descriptor that would show up in the story index, e.g., "Malibu Wildfire." Next would come an editor's note that, like the slug, was not for publication. In the case of the Malibu fire, it might provide the fire's coordinates in a map book and a contact number for the county fire department.

Larger stories would get a one-line headline and a byline with the reporter's name. Next, in all caps, would come the "dateline" and the CNS "bug" — "MALIBU (CNS)" — followed by the story. Datelines are supposed to tell where a story was written, but for stories without bylines, the CNS dateline would identify where the news was happening. Sometimes a reporter or editor would accidentally put a dateline like Malibu on a bylined story written in Los Angeles,

and that was known as "taking a magic carpet ride."

Stories would build throughout the day. The Malibu Wildfire might start out as four paragraphs saying when and where the fire was reported. As more information became available, a second version of the story, called a first lede (Malibu Fire, 1st Ld), might add the number of acres charred and property damage. If any celebrities' homes were damaged, there might be a "sidebar" (Malibu Wildfire-Celebrity Homes). Editor's notes would explain what changes were made to a new lede, unless they were major revisions, in which case it would be slugged Malibu Wildfire, 2nd Ld-Writethru. After midnight, the next version of the story would be slugged Malibu Wildfire again and the cycle would repeat.

Other kinds of stories included "pick-ups," in which CNS editors would write shorter versions of stories from other media outlets; "turn-arounds," including "overnighters," which involved "moving the story forward" by adding a fresh angle to yesterday's news; and "headlines" (or "heads"), six three-sentence news items and the weather written in present tense — also called "rip and read" because deejays sometimes ripped the headlines off the printer and read them verbatim on the air. As I drove home from work through the nightmare that is L.A. rush hour, one of my few pleasures was hearing a head I'd written read on the local affiliate of National Public Radio, in between segments of *All Things Considered*.

Having been a somewhat feisty reporter before becoming an editor, I figured editing at a wire service like CNS would mostly involve reining in the reporters by toning down their stories, or what I used to call "gutting" when I was a scribe. But in many cases just the opposite occurred, and I found myself punching up stories. Part of the reason was that the reporters were overworked and didn't have time to rewrite their dispatches, and another was that they were trying not to make mistakes, which was a good thing. A third reason is that, as I note throughout the following stories, there are two kinds of editors — careful editors who strive for accuracy and fairness, and risk-takers who also look for more provocative angles — and I fell into the second category, which wasn't always a good thing.

While I was at CNS, the news business was getting pummeled by a volatile mix of digitalization and tabloidization. "New media"

— blogs, news aggregators, gossipy or investigative websites, and social media like Facebook and Twitter — were starting to kick the crap out of "old media," such as print, radio and TV. The Internet had made news reporting so cheap and easy that anyone with a computer and a juicy tidbit could attract more readers than the largest newspapers. Advertisers noticed, as did old media, which began slashing overhead, i.e., reporters and editors, and by loosening their standards for what constituted news, such as whether Britney Spears was wearing her knickers.

A third influence that transformed journalism occurred on Sept. 11, 2001. When I first became a reporter in the 1970s, one of the unwritten rules was that you didn't do stories on fake bomb threats so as not to inspire copycats. After 9/11, the specter of international terrorism could hang over even the most innocuous of stories, such as the 2002 Hollywood Christmas Parade, which was delayed so an LAPD bomb squad could investigate an unattended satchel. It turned out the bag contained the clothes of a transient who'd put on a Santa suit. I headlined that story, "Santa Claus Holds Up Christmas Parade."

New media could be more nimble and flashy, but old media claimed to be more credible, because they used a "gatekeeper" system, in which stories written by reporters were checked by editors for accuracy and fairness before they were released to the public. Presumably, these were skilled and experienced editors who knew what they were doing. And that was my job, to be the final gatekeeper, the last line of defense between mistake and calamity. It was heady but scary to be the guy with his "finger on the button." The editor who hired me described it as playing shortstop without any outfielders. If a routine ground ball got between my legs, it could roll all the way to the wall. I might catch 99 mistakes, but let one get by me and the game could be over.

I used to beat myself up over every error I made, but I eventually conceded that no matter what I did, I'd always make another. So I lowered my expectations and just tried not to make the same mistake twice, which was hard enough. Some nights I'd come home, still keyed up from work, and try to unwind by writing about something that had happened during my shift. The following stories are not meant to be representative of City News or its employees, although

a whole other book could be written about the characters who have worked there. Many of the stories involve mistakes, mostly by me. Some touch on new media, terrorism and tabloidization, and some are just whimsical. They say that every writer needs an editor. But who edits the editor?

1998
Hope is Alive

Bob Hope died on July 27, 2003, at age 100. Five years earlier, his death was widely reported by news outlets, blurring the line between old and new media.

Cyber journalist Matt Drudge had reason to laugh on June 5, 1998, when the media erroneously reported Bob Hope had died. The greatly exaggerated reports of the revered comic's demise happened just days after Drudge had spoken at a National Press Club luncheon in Washington, D.C., where he had been harangued by mainstream journalists for a lack of professionalism, journalistic ethics and editorial gatekeepers.

At the time, Drudge was a 31-year-old former CBS studio gift shop clerk with no college education and no prior journalism experience. But with some behind-the-scenes mentoring from fellow conservative mischief-maker Andrew Breitbart, he became the first new media superstar via his email newsletter and website, the Drudge Report. From a one-bedroom apartment in Hollywood, and with almost no overhead, he used the Internet to aggregate stories from the websites of old media. Little more than an unvarnished list of snarky headlines and links to the websites of newspapers, magazines and TV stations, Drudge was essentially freeloading off old media. But he was also driving more traffic to their sites than they could generate by themselves. The Drudge Report became a daily must-read for mainstream journalists, influencing the news coverage of the very news outlets that were criticizing him.

As the Drudge Report's readership grew, insiders began feeding him tips, usually involving liberals, Democrats or celebrities, not the least being the Monica Lewinsky affair. In January 1998, *Newsweek* reporter Michael Isikoff wrote a story about Whitewater Special Prosecutor Ken Starr widening his investigation of Whitewater, a smalltime land deal in Arkansas involving Bill and Hillary Clinton, to allegations the president had an affair with a White House intern. When the gatekeepers at *Newsweek* decided to hold the story

to mull over how to play it, someone tipped off Drudge, who issued a "World Exclusive:" "NEWSWEEK KILLS STORY ON WHITE HOUSE INTERN ... SEX RELATIONSHIP WITH PRESIDENT." As a result, an old media story about prosecutorial overreach became sensationalized into a sleazy presidential sexcapade that metastasized into the national embarrassment and impeachment ordeal known as Monicagate. Not that it wouldn't have anyway.

Drudge had made some mistakes, but at the Press Club lunch, he defended his methods by noting that even before "Dewey Defeats Truman," the history of American journalism is besotted with mistakes and "sloppiness" that are the inevitable trade-offs for a vigorous, fast and free press. As if to prove his point, a couple days later, someone at the esteemed Associated Press pushed the wrong button and a canned obituary on Bob Hope, possibly being updated in the aftermath of Frank Sinatra's death, accidentally got posted to its website. Like many news organizations, AP prepares obituaries in advance on famous people so stories can be sent quickly when they do die. Death notices are one of the many areas in which AP excels, and it is often the first to report a celebrity's death. (Even though AP is among the most credible of news sources, the rule at City News was to never report anything from AP unless the story could be "matched," which meant we had to confirm the information with our own sources. Especially on weekends, tracking down dead celebrities' publicists, family members or hospital representatives could take hours, making CNS look worse by the minute.)

In AP's Hope "preparedness" story, X's marked where editors would fill in specifics when the time came. The headline read, "Bob Hope, Tireless Master of the One-Liner, Dead at XX," and the first paragraph read, "LOS ANGELES (AP) — Bob Hope, the master of the one-liner and tireless morale-booster for servicemen from World War II to the Gulf War, xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx He was xx. (born May 29, 1903)."

AP, which is the world's largest news gathering organization, soon became aware of its error and deleted the story from its website. But not before a congressional staffer saw the item and gave a printout to House Majority Leader Dick Armey, who handed it to Rep. Bob Stump of Arizona, who proceeded to announce Hope's death on

the floor of the U.S. House of Representatives, where it was broadcast live on C-SPAN. The "news" was soon picked up by other news outlets, and by the end of the day, Drudge was able to report that "in a special national news alert, complete with a Bob Hope death package of clips and performances, ABC NEWS reported Bob Hope dead, citing congress and REUTERS as its source."

Unaware that he was dead, and presumably more puzzled than concerned by the news choppers circling above his Toluca Lake home near Burbank, the 95-year-old entertainer was having breakfast when the "news" broke. According to the Drudge Report, it was while ABC news was making its special report that Hope's publicist called the network to say the entertainer was still kicking, causing ABC to correct the story, "live on air, during its initial report." In journalism parlance, that's known as the Lazarus effect. A sanguine Drudge added that, "In January, ABC NEWS NIGHTLINE devoted a show to the perils of speed Internet reporting and the danger of false information being circulated online without fact-checkers and editors."

How could such a thing happen? Many blamed the Internet. After all, if it weren't for AP's website, the House staffer wouldn't have seen the story. Unless the staffer had access to a newswire printer, where stories, letters, memos and notes have also been sent inadvertently. Think Linda Ellerbee. And if it weren't for another old medium, cable TV, providing live coverage of Congress, the story might not have spread so fast.

A more serious problem exposed by the incident is the extent to which the Washington political and media establishments have become chummy. While each professes to distrust the other, reporters tend to accept the word of politicians and vice versa. So when a politician says a news service says Bob Hope is dead, on TV to boot, it must be true. People shouldn't trust what they see on the Internet any more than what they see in a newspaper or on TV, or, for that matter, on the floor of Congress. But the bottom line is that cyberspace has only made a free press freer. As Drudge noted during his appearance at the Press Club, it has often been said that the only ones who really have freedom of the press are those who own the printing presses. With the coming of the Internet, anyone with a computer and

a modem has access to a virtual printing press, bringing freedom of the press to everyone. For better and for worse.

1998

Not So Fast, Meryl

What should journalists do when they are too close to a story? Probably not what I did.

On June 19, 1998, actress Meryl Streep received a Crystal Award from the entertainment industry trade group Women In Film, at a luncheon/fundraiser at the posh Century Plaza hotel, practically across the street from where I worked at City News Service. Streep used the occasion to criticize a recently released list compiled by my former employer, the American Film Institute, of the "100 Greatest Movies of All Time," which became a three-hour special that aired on CBS and a series of specials on TNT. AFI had created its "100 Years ... 100 Movies" list by sending ballots to hundreds of entertainment industry insiders, asking them to vote for their favorite flicks and tallying the results.

At a news conference before the luncheon, WIF had released its own survey showing how under-represented women were in the movie industry, and when Streep got up to accept her award, she asked how many women in the audience had gotten a ballot from AFI. "Me neither," she huffed, and said she thought the list was sexist because it was overweighted with films written, directed by and starring men.

In addition to Streep, Carrie Fisher, Geena Davis, James Cameron and even Jack Nicholson were among the many Hollywood heavyweights in attendance, as was my former boss, AFI Director Jean Firstenberg. I also happened to be at the award show because I was friends with the event producer, Bobbi Frank, and had helped her with the show's tribute book. I was just trying to stay out of the way, but I ran into the woman who had replaced me as Firstenberg's assistant. She had also left the film school and was working at Sony Pictures Studios. She told me the director's other assistant had gone to work at *US* magazine, so there was a new secretary in the director's office.

When I heard Streep say she never got to vote on her favorite

movies, I blanched. One of my assignments at AFI had involved the very ballots she was talking about. I'd been given a list of about 1,500 names of Hollywood's elite, and my job had been to look up their addresses. Putting aside the fact that the longtime head of AFI was herself a woman, it seemed to me there had been lots of females on the list, and I would have been amazed if Streep hadn't been among them. So either the esteemed actress was mistaken or the schmuck responsible for verifying her address had screwed up.

As it so happened, one of the "souvenirs" I took when I left AFI was a copy of the address list of Hollywood's elite, and when I got home from the award show I dug it out. Sure enough, Streep's name was on it, as was a check mark, meaning I had found an address for her — the address of her agent at CAA. (The ballot would have been hard to miss, as it was sent in a gold 32mm film canister.) I breathed a sigh of relief, and then it occurred to me that Streep may have committed news.

I figured the lazy media probably reported Streep called the 100/100 list sexist without bothering to get a reaction from AFI, and I could be the first to get the other side of the story. But I was in the ethically challenged position of being part of the story I wanted to report.

I could hardly speak on behalf of AFI, but I could tell an AFI spokesman what I knew, then have him tell me what he knew, and report on that. I didn't think that was a conflict of interest because I had no interest, except to get the facts straight. Nor did the fact that I had helped with the Women In Film event keep me from proceeding with a story. I called Seth Oster, AFI's communications director, and got his answering machine. Then I called Director Firstenberg's office and encountered her new secretary, who transferred my call back to Seth's answering machine. I called the secretary again and tried to explain that Meryl Streep had dumped on AFI at the Crystal Awards, and I used to work at AFI and currently worked for a wire service, and that it was really important that I talk to Jean or Seth, but the secretary didn't think it was so important and started to transfer my call to Seth's answering machine again.

Luckily, Seth's secretary happened to walk by, and the director's secretary put her on the phone. After a moment she remembered

who I was and I went through my spiel again. She said Seth was on the phone with the director, but she'd walk my message in to him, because that's what they were on the phone about.

Within seconds Seth called me back and said news stories had come out saying there weren't enough women on the list, and so far, only one news outlet had called AFI for a response. I told him what I remembered about the address list — not mentioning, of course, that I had a pilfered copy of the list — and that I also wanted to report AFI's side of the story for City News. AFI had its own records of the mailing, and he read me the press release he and the director had just drafted, which said Streep was sent a ballot via her agent, and that about 20 of the top 100 movies had strong female protagonists, including *Casablanca*, *Gone With the Wind*, *Wizard of Oz*, *The Graduate*, *All About Eve*, *Sound of Music*, *Network*, *Fargo*, *My Fair Lady* and *Annie Hall*. (*Citizen Kane* was the top movie.)

Next, I called City News to pitch the story — not mentioning, of course, that I had been involved in mailing the ballots. The managing editor told me that CNS ran a story based on WIF's pre-show press conference on female underemployment in the film industry, but didn't have a reporter at the luncheon, so they'd missed Streep's comments about the AFI list. He said he'd consider running a Streep story if I could write one quickly.

I had a few more questions for Seth, so I called him back, or tried to, except I got his answering machine, and when I called the director's office I got the uncooperative secretary, who tried to transfer me back to his answering machine, before grudgingly writing down my message for Seth to call me. It was around 5:30 in the afternoon, late in the news cycle, before Seth got the message and called me back.

I finished interviewing Seth and started to write the story when the phone rang again. It was my friend Bobbi, who was decompressing after producing the Crystal Awards. When I told her I was writing a story about Streep's comments, she said Women In Film had tried to find out if the actress had gotten a ballot but couldn't get an answer from AFI.

I asked her what she meant, and she said that before the show, "Meryl" had personally asked her to have WIF call AFI to ask if she'd been sent a ballot and how many other women got ballots. But,

Bobbi said, when her assistant called AFI, "she got this secretary who got snippy." I knew what she meant. So Meryl asked Bobbi if she thought she should go ahead with her remarks, and Bobbi was the one who gave her the green light.

I asked Bobbi to comment on the Streep-AFI tiff, and she said WIF totally supported Streep. "But Bobbi, I personally addressed her ballot," I protested. She chuckled and said it didn't really matter whether the actress got to vote, because the flap was generating publicity for Women In Film as well as AFI, making it a win-win.

It was also a win for me. I finished the story and dictated it over the phone to the editor, who turned it into a sidebar that began, "Not so fast, Meryl." He even gave me a byline.

1998
Anatomy of a Cyber Hoax

During the summer of 1998, an Internet rumor went viral that people would be able to watch two purported teenage virgins having sex, live, at a website called Our First Time. In fact, it was all a publicity stunt orchestrated by a cyber-savvy aspiring filmmaker who was attempting to generate some buzz for his movie projects. He succeeded all too well, attracting millions of hits to his website, and the wrath of such culture warriors as Rush Limbaugh and Newt Gingrich. But then he tangled with the folks who actually did show live sex on the Internet, and the buzz he'd hoped for turned into a buzz saw.

I first became aware of Our First Time on July 18, when the *L.A. Times* ran a story "exposing" the live virgin sex site as a "hoax" by a "smalltime actor," identified as 45-year-old Ken Tipton of Los Angeles, who was "unavailable for comment." The main source in the story was an attorney for Seattle-based Internet Entertainment Group, which at the time ran the most lucrative porn site on the Internet, the one that first sold the Pamela Anderson/Tommy Lee sex video. I happened to have been familiar with IEG, having written about it in my cyber column.

There were approximately 14 million people in the greater Los Angeles metropolitan area, and in the few months I'd lived there, I'd met a couple dozen of them. With a jolt, I realized one of them happened to be Tipton. Months before, I'd been at his house in the San Fernando Valley to interview him for a column I'd done on another of his websites, which he'd successfully used to raise funds to finance a small indie romcom.

The media had only reported one side of the virgin sex story, so I figured if I could find Tipton and get him to talk, I'd have a major scoop. Frantically leafing through used notebooks, I managed to find his phone number and reached his answering machine. I left a sympathetic message saying I knew he was in a world of shit and that I thought I could help him out. And then I waited.

About an hour later the phone rang and it was Tipton. Anxiously,

he told me he'd been dodging calls from every journalist from Larry King on down, but had decided to return mine because "we've got a history." The second thing he told me was that he couldn't talk to me, and anything he might say would be off the record.

I blurted out a question anyway, which he answered, so I asked another, which he also answered, and pretty soon he was spilling his guts about how he set out to lure the biggest audience in Internet history to his website, so he and his actor friends could say "now that we've got your attention," and then put on a streaming video cyber drama/public service announcement about safe sex, in which the two virgins would decide to put off doing the nasty until they were more mature. Only he couldn't tell me any of this because they were maintaining media silence until a face-saving news conference set to occur in a couple of days.

We talked for about 45 minutes, and when I finally got off the phone I was totally jazzed. Everyone had weighed in on the virgin sex website, from Rush to Leno, but I was the first person to have interviewed the man behind the scam. An exclusive, a scoop of the L.A., hell, the world media. A chance to make my mark.

There was, of course, one small problem: Tipton had used the magic words, "off the record." I could try calling him back to negotiate, or I might try fudging and use his information, but describe the source as "someone close to the hoax." After careful consideration, for about a nanosecond, I decided screw it. I'd never before burned a source who'd said OTR, but this scoop was just too juicy, Tipton too smalltime, and the penalty for violating the canons of journalism too slight. If I was going to betray a source, it wasn't going to be a mere fudge job. I'd go all the way. Everything would be on the record, including quotes.

Tipton had mentioned he also had a history with a TV guy, so I figured my "exclusive" would hold for 24 hours at best. I was up until 5 a.m. writing the story, making sure I'd have it ready for City News Service first thing in the morning. But there was one thing I hadn't counted on, one thing I never imagined: CNS rejected the story.

After faxing the story to CNS, I'd followed up with a phone call, but the editor seemed to shrug. "We haven't been covering this story up to now," he said. "There just don't seem to be any good guys."

I was dumbfounded. Hadn't our clients, especially the morning drive talk radio deejays, been milking the story for days? Hadn't the *L.A. Times* just done a one-sided story? Didn't I have the other side, an exclusive interview with the man behind the hoax? With all the other fluff and filth that passes for news, why would City News suddenly come down with a case of journalistic integrity when it came to my one puny story, my single exclusive scoop, my chance to garner 15 minutes of fame in front of the L.A. media? What the flying fuck!

Sometime later, another editor told me the decision not to run my story probably had little to do with journalistic integrity. The story was long by wire service standards, and at the time, CNS didn't have the technological sophistication to copy and paste text from an email into a story file. So the main reason may have been that CNS was too short-handed that day to have someone key it in.

Attempting to turn adversity into opportunity, my next call was to the *L.A. Times*. I got ahold of an editor, explained that I was from City News, had an exclusive on the man behind the cyber scam, but CNS had passed on the story. Would the *Times* want it? I figured saying I worked for a wire service would make the *Times* take me seriously. But the part the editor took seriously was that City News had passed. I faxed her the story, she said she liked it, but that she'd pass, too. Next I called my friend Matt to find out if Copley News Service could use the story. He said he'd pass it on. I got the same response from the *L.A. Daily News*, *Variety*, *Hollywood Reporter* and Associated Press. They all decided to pass.

I tried to take it in stride. Rejection is the writer's stock-in-trade. The story really wasn't news in the sense of being a big deal. It could have been written better, my pitch to editors had been off. I'd almost convinced myself to accept it as a learning experience, until the next evening, when I saw the story about Tipton's news conference on all the local TV channels. Let me rephrase: Tipton's news conference led all the local TV news broadcasts, and I quote: "Our top story tonight." I listened closely to what followed, and in all the major details I had the story right and I'd had it first, 36 hours earlier. So much for my big scoop.

Eventually, I rewrote the story for my cyber column, and it went something like this:

Recently, a 45-year-old aspiring actor and filmmaker in Los Angeles, Ken Tipton, started a rumor that two teens planned to have live virgin sex on the Internet. It seemed like a good idea at the time. He would lure the largest audience in Internet history to his website, only instead of showing live sex, over 18 days he would present a free public service announcement extolling the virtues of safe sex. In other words, a publicity stunt. But having issued statements about his website under an alias, Oscar Wells, in homage to Orson Welles' 1938 radio broadcast "War of the Worlds," he caught some of the same flak Welles got for his Halloween hoax.

Tipton's website, Our First Time, purported to be the online diary of "Diane and Mike," two 18-year-old high school graduates, "typical All-American kids as you can get," who had decided to lose their virginity on the Internet (in reality, actors Michelle Parma and Ty Taylor, who were both adults and not virgins). The two were shown hugging in swimsuits and cutoffs, but with their faces dramatically blacked out.

Tipton also appeared on the site, in the guise of Oscar Wells, a paternal narrator who provided background and perspective. The website carried several discreet disclaimers, including, "This story is the fictionalized account of the lives of two adults, over an eighteen day period, as they face the consequences of their decision to have the world watch as they consummate their first sexual union."

Beginning July 18, Our First Time was to have posted a new storyboard and pictures daily, tracking the progress of the two teens as they got AIDS tests, picked out condoms, told their parents about their plans and took other steps leading to an Aug. 4 climax, so to speak, that was to have been shown live in streaming video. The saga was to have ended with Mike and Diane shacked up in a motel room, clad in "brand name white briefs" and a satin white teddy, unwrapping a condom. Suddenly Mike would say, "I've got a better idea." After declaring his eternal love to Diane, he would say he could wait until after they graduate college to have sex, and she would agree.

The camera was then supposed to pan to "Oscar," who was to have explained the charade by saying that 60 years ago, Orson Welles "chose to shock the nation with an experiment that illustrated the

power of the new communication medium called the radio," and that "over the last 18 days, we chose to educate the world with an experiment that illustrated the power of the new communication medium called the Internet."

But on July 21, Tipton posted all 18 storyboards, with the live streaming video finale replaced by script pages. What caused Tipton to change his plans was Internet Entertainment Group, perhaps the largest adult content provider on the Internet. At the time, one of the few industries to be making money online was cyberporn, and one of the most successful of the cyberporn peddlers was 25-year-old IEG President Seth Warshavsky, whose Seattle-based new media company made an estimated $20 million in 1997 through Club Love and its other live streaming video porn websites.

With the profits he'd made from a phone-sex operation started in college, Warshavsky converted a warehouse near the King Dome in Seattle into a studio where women took off their clothes and played with themselves. The studio included a bedroom, dungeon and shower equipped with webcams and microphones, which broadcast the video straight onto the Internet. For a monthly membership fee, plus an hourly charge, you could watch the women strip and touch themselves in real time on your computer screen. For more money you could talk to the women over the phone and "direct" them, and if you liked the show, of course you could tip them. As for the women — and men — who touched themselves in that warehouse in Seattle, it may have been the skin trade, but it was a heck of a lot safer than prostitution.

Tipton said he hooked up with IEG because his hoax worked all too well. He said that within 10 hours of starting his virgin sex rumor by posting an anonymous message to an Internet newsgroup, his website was receiving so many visitors that he needed a bigger service provider. He also needed a bigger checkbook, because mega traffic costs mega bucks. And when the media picked up the rumor, and people like Rush Limbaugh began denouncing his site, he said Our First Time began getting millions of hits a day, promising a huge worldwide audience for the Aug. 4 finale.

Internet traffic is the most valuable commodity in cyberspace, but Tipton said he was generating so much traffic that the only com-

puters big enough to handle it were owned by government agencies like the Pentagon, or Internet service providers that specialized in adult websites. Enter IEG which, Tipton said, contacted him and offered to host his site for free. In exchange, IEG wanted exclusive rights to place its banner ads on his page, funneling his massive traffic to its adult websites.

"It had to be them (IEG) or the entire government of a small country," he said. "I just wanted to put my show on."

In their July 16 agreement, it appears neither side was entirely forthright. IEG described itself as a distributor of "entertainment, news and information on the world wide web," and Tipton tried to pass himself off as Oscar Wells. The deal fell apart the next day, although exactly why was in dispute. Warshavsky issued a press release saying he terminated the agreement. He also exposed Tipton's scheme, calling it "a money-making publicity hoax," and claimed Tipton planned to charge people on the final day, even though the couple weren't going to have sex.

Tipton said he pulled out of the agreement first because IEG reneged on its promise to provide a warning page between his website and IEG's Club Love. He added that his 18-day Web show was always meant to be free, and that it was IEG who wanted him to charge for the real thing.

Tipton found another corporate sponsor, Condomania, a chain store that sells condoms, and just like Orson Welles, he held a press conference to try to explain that his 18-day "soap opera" had always been meant to be a free and family-oriented message about "safe sex and responsible choices." But by then the media had reported IEG's accusations of a hoax, and the damage had been done.

"I'm just sorry we never had the chance to put our show on the way we wanted," Tipton said.

In May 2000, I got a call from an attorney for Warshavsky, whose law firm also represented Hustler *publisher Larry Flynt. He said Tipton was suing his client, and he wanted to subpoena me to appear in court to affirm that what I said Tipton said in my story was in fact what Tipton had said. Just my luck, the only story in which I ever betrayed a source who talked to me off the record was the only story I*

was ever asked to testify about under oath. I thought the attorney was talking about my cyber column, but unbeknownst to me, a Copley paper, the San Diego Union-Tribune*, ran my story on July 28, 1998. I never got paid for it, but at least the newspaper gave me a byline.*

The trial was to begin in June 2000, but Judge Manuel Real, the same Judge Real immortalized in the movie The People vs. Larry Flynt*, dismissed Tipton's case without comment. Tipton appealed and won a unanimous reversal. The case was sent back to Judge Real, who in August 2002 again dismissed the case without saying why. By that time Warshavsky had fled to Thailand, avoiding bill collectors (including his own attorneys) and mounting criminal and civil lawsuits. The last I heard, Tipton wanted to appeal the second dismissal. He was also writing a screenplay about the experience, working title* Virgin Territory*. I'm still waiting to testify.*

2001
Slow News Days

On slow news days, I had a tendency to goose up what little news there was, and sometimes that would get me into trouble. For instance, I once edited an overnight story about a fire at a pet store in which most of the inventory perished. Some prissy editor called to complain because I'd slugged the story "Crispy Critters." Here's some examples of other times I should have played it straight.

It was around midnight on Presidents Day, 2001, and with one more hour to my shift at the wire service, things were winding down. The phone rang, forcing me to take my feet off the desk and mute the TV. At the other end of the line was one of those late-night tipsters — McGruff the Crime Dog wannabes or freelance "video vampires" who monitor the police scanner and race to the scene of grisly accidents to get the scoop.

Tipsters tend to be unreliable, and this one was no exception, having provided information in the past that had proved to be exaggerated, if not entirely fabricated. In this instance, he said that in a rural area of northeast Los Angeles County, a motorist had run over a flock of sheep that had wandered onto the highway. He said a second car had slammed into the first, and both drivers, who were probably drunk, had abandoned their vehicles and fled the scene.

He said there were about 40 dead sheep on the road. Others were so badly injured they were euthanized, while two were found unharmed beneath the carnage. He also said he'd talked to a shepherd who'd said the sheep had probably bolted through a break in the fence when a coyote scared them, and that the road had been closed for three hours to clean up the mess.

"It was like a war zone," he said, "really sad," with sheep blood and carcasses everywhere.

There's nothing like a good animal story. The one time I'd gotten a scoop that ended up in *The New York Times* was when I was working the weekend night cop shift at the Springfield *State Journal-Register*, making routine cop calls, and a rural police department dispatcher

told me a dozen pregnant cows had been stolen. The *J-R* sent my story to the AP wire and *The Times* picked it up. But I digress.

I thanked the tipster for his sheep slaughter tip and relayed the information to the overnight police reporter. A half hour later the reporter called to say he wasn't able to get very much, but that two sources had confirmed the basic outline. I asked him to send me a story, and was elated to see that at 9:05 p.m., the California Highway Patrol had received a call about dead sheep, and both the CHP and the Los Angeles County Fire Department had found 30-40 deceased sheep and two abandoned autos.

I can't remember the exact lede he wrote, except that he referred to a "herd" of sheep instead of a "flock." I also remember thinking that "hit" or whatever verb he'd used to describe the crash seemed inadequate. I tried out "slammed into," which is a cliché, "plowed into" which was more agrarian, but then came upon the irresistible choice, it being the end of my shift and all. I slugged the story "Rammed Sheep."

Mother's Day 2001 was another slow news night, and I was in a lighthearted mood. So when the police reporter sent up a story about a hospital that was turning people away because it had a patient who tried to commit suicide by swallowing the pesticide malathion and might be "exhaling toxic fumes," I slugged the story "Bad Breath."

Before putting out the midnight heads — a package of five news briefs gleaned from earlier stories, followed by an on-the-lighter-side "brite" or "kicker" — I asked the overnight cop reporter, who had replaced the evening cop reporter, to find out whether the hospital had canceled the bad breath alert, because I was itching to make "Bad Breath" my brite. The reporter called the hospital and sometime after 11 p.m. sent up a story saying the alert was over. So I did a quick 1st Ld stating the warning to stay away from the hospital had been canceled, hit the button to send it to all the news clients, wrote a brite that began, "Talk about bad breath ..." and was just about to transmit the heads when the cop reporter called again.

"It's kind of a nuance thing," she said. A "huffy" hospital spokeslady had told her the hospital didn't exactly cancel the warning because there never was any warning. Oh oh. I should mention that

the story began with a tip from a video vampire who claimed there'd been an "evacuation" at the hospital, and when the first reporter called the hospital, he hadn't talked to an official spokesperson, but an unidentified employee who said there'd been no evacuation, but they were warning people to stay away.

Upon further investigation, it also turned out that the police and fire departments knew nada about any alert. But the night nurse did confirm that a suicide patient claimed to have eaten malathion, the patient was in "stable" condition, and no one had gotten sick from breathing fumes. So I was able to salvage the story, although in retrospect, it was insensitive to slug a story about an attempted suicide "Bad Breath," much less turn it into a brite.

For the rest of the heads, I led with the Jewish Home for the Aging holding what it claimed was the biggest Mom's Day fete in the world, and an environmental group in Santa Monica that encouraged the public to sign a 15-foot-high card to Mother Earth that would be sent to President George W. Bush. Next I did the obligatory update on actor Robert Blake, whose wife, Bonnie Lee Bakley, had been shot to death nine days earlier. The "latest developments" were that Blake's bodyguard claimed he saw a stalker outside the actor's home for weeks before Bakley was killed, but that when he told the police, all they wanted to talk about was Robert Blake. (A jury found Blake not guilty of murder in 2005.)

I also wrote an item about what appeared to be a routine missing person case. A young woman from Modesto, in central California, who had interned with the Federal Bureau of Prisons in Washington, D.C., hadn't been seen since the end of April. Modesto and Washington were both out of City News' coverage area, but there was a saying around the office that every story has an L.A. angle. The woman, Chandra Levy, had been a student at USC.

The *Los Angeles Times* had done a 546-word story about her not showing up for her graduation ceremony, and I did a pick-up. At the time, the *Times* was "featurizing" a lot of its news stories, which sometimes resulted in burying the lede, which meant not getting to the meat of the story right away, and the Chandra Levy article was a prime example. It began with a description of the graduation ceremony, and how what was normally a joyful time was more somber

because one of the graduating students was missing. Piling on the schmaltz, the story described an empty chair in an alphabetical row of students where Levy would have sat. Buried on the jump page, 15 paragraphs in, were the comments of a coed sitting near the empty chair. She said Levy had told her she had been in a secretive relationship with someone "involved in politics."

Rewriting the story, I deep-sixed the seating chart and got straight to the point: "A mystery man — maybe a politician — could figure in the disappearance of a USC student missing since completing an internship in Washington, D.C., it was reported today." The TV stations picked up my pick-up and I heard my lede read several times practically verbatim. I had scooped the *Times* on its own story.

Within days, a Democratic congressman from central California, Gary Condit, was identified as the man Levy had been having an affair with. It was eventually determined that a deranged homeless man had killed Levy in a park, but not before Condit's political career had gone down the crapper.

But at the time, nobody knew the Chandra Levy story was about to blow up into a sex scandal. In fact, it had been such a slow news day that the L.A. stations KCBS, KNBC and KABC all led their 11 o'clock newscasts with the death of Perry Como. In Florida.

It was 9:15 on a Sunday night, Aug. 26, 2001, and like a lot of Sunday nights, not much was going on. I perked up when the phone rang and this guy says he's the famous palimony attorney Marvin Mitchelson, and his process server just subpoenaed New York Yankee outfielder David Justice during the Yankees' game against the Angels in Anaheim.

He was talking fast and not terribly clear, so I cut in. "What did you say your name is?"

"Marvin Mitchelson," he sputtered. "I'm the attorney who filed the very first palimony suit many years ago."

"Against actor Lee Marvin," I said, my command of trivia, if not news judgment, coming to the fore. "And who did you serve?"

"David Justice," he sputtered again.

"The baseball player?" I asked. "The ex-husband of Halle Berry?"

"Yes," he snorted.

"During a ballgame? You're kidding?"

"No," he chuckled.

"And who is your client?" I asked, revealing the total depth of my ignorance.

He said he represented Justice's ex-fiance and mother of his 2-year-old son. Under more of my probing interrogation, he told me Justice had been ducking his subpoenas, and that the Yankee is usually a designated hitter, but that night he was playing left field. He said he sent four process servers to the game, and in the ninth inning — 20 minutes ago — one of them leaped over the wall and ran up to Justice in the outfield and handed him the subpoena. Justice looked at the papers, then threw them in the air, he said.

I asked for a number where I could reach him if I had any more questions, hung up, and gulped. Across the room from where I sat was a big sign that read, "Get it first, but first get it right." But I wasn't looking at the sign. I already had my slug: Justice Served.

The first thing I did was run a search of CNS stories on David Justice, and found a story from the previous day on Mitchelson filing a palimony suit. Now my heart was really starting to race. I clicked through the channels trying to find the Angels game, then clicked on the satellite, with its 900 channels, but couldn't find it. Then I ran over to the AP wire and confirmed that the Yanks were playing in Anaheim. So I pulled the trigger on an advisory saying Marvin Mitchelson says David Justice just got served during the Yankees game against the Angels.

Now class, let's count how many cardinal rules of journalism just got broken. First of all, even though I had attributed my information to a source, I didn't know whether the person I'd been talking to was Marvin Mitchelson or some drunk at Dan Tana'S. Second, I was giving credence to the alleged attorney's story because of how detailed it was, even though detail is a trait of pathological liars. Third, even if it were Marvin Mitchelson, I didn't have a second source to confirm a single detail of his account of what happened during the game. I had it first, but had no idea if I had it right.

I could have written a "not for publication" advisory saying the news agency was looking into an unconfirmed report that the base-

ball player got subpoenaed during the game, alerting the rest of the media so they could check it out, but then I would have lost my scoop. Instead, I compounded my mistake by rushing out a story, with what I thought was the perfect lede: "Justice was served tonight. David Justice."

I wish I'd waited just two more minutes, because that's when a reporter from one of the TV stations called and said he'd read my advisory and was wondering if I had a second source.

My turn to sputter. "Um, no, but I figured that since it was a reputable attorney," I trailed off oxymoronically.

The reporter told me there was no video of anyone running on the field and none of the sports reporters at the ballpark had seen anything. This was not good.

It didn't help matters that at the same time, one of the other TV stations was doing its 10 o'clock newscast, and during the sports section, reported that Justice got served during the game — a come-from-behind Angels victory in 10 innings. And I knew the TV station had used my advisory, without attribution, based not on the credibility of Marvin Mitchelson, but on CNS' credibility, which I had just laid on the line.

Now what? I tried the number the famous palimony attorney had left me. To my relief, instead of a local tavern, I got his pager, but no return call. I rifled through drawers and cabinets until I came across a phone number for the California Angels and dialed it. I got another recording. Finally I just hunkered down and waited for the worst.

AP had the real story first, reporting that a process server for Mitchelson had "failed" to subpoena Justice during the game. That one had tried to come on the field, but had been caught by security before he could get close to the ballplayer. The AP account said the man had dropped the legal papers, which had been picked up by an unidentified man.

CBS and NBC had more sickening details at 11. It wasn't the ninth inning but the eighth and it wasn't left field but first base. Justice had just walked when the process server tried to get on the field but was removed by security. Justice was replaced by a pinch runner and the game went on.

About then the phone rang again, and it was the TV reporter

calling back to gloat. He said Mitchelson's account was "total bullshit," which was true. But I was relieved that the essence of the story had held up — that during the ballgame, someone had tried to serve Justice.

Time to do a "clarification," which sounds less embarrassing than "correction." I rewrote the story, attributing the corrected information to the TV station, then turned to the midnight headlines. I considered leading with Justice, but instead used him for the kicker. Attempting to salvage as much of my original account as I could, here's what I wrote:

"Justice may have been served ... David Justice, that is. During last night's baseball game between the New York Yankees and the California Angels in Anaheim, a process server hired by famed palimony attorney Marvin Mitchelson tried to serve the Yankee outfielder with a subpoena in a $5 million palimony suit. During the eighth inning the process server bolted onto the field but was caught by security officers before reaching Justice at first base. It was not clear if Justice was legally served."

2001
Tragic Mountain

Sometimes sources tell reporters things they shouldn't, like the unvarnished truth, and sometimes editors can't resist passing on the information.

On Saturday, June 2, 2001, a 28-year-old woman died while riding Goliath, a ginormous roller coaster at Six Flags Magic Mountain in Valencia, north of Los Angeles. There was no evidence of foul play or equipment failure, and of the million people who had ridden Goliath since it opened the previous year, the woman was the first to have perished.

On Sunday, City News had a story slugged Coaster Death (I resisted the urge to re-slug it Tragic Mountain) that said an autopsy was pending. Shortly after I arrived for my evening shift, the cop reporter became the first to get the preliminary results from the Los Angeles County Coroner's Office — an official said the cause of death was "subarachnoid hemorrhage and ruptured berry aneurysm of the cerebral artery."

A careful editor would have been satisfied with the official wording, but I preferred plain English, so I asked the reporter to call back the coroner for a translation. I was hoping for something simple, like "stroke." Instead, the reporter sent up a story quoting a second coroner's official: "The ride caused her death."

Whoa … Actually, whoa is what I should have thought. But what I thought was, "Wow, that's worth ringing the bell," and I immediately put out an advisory saying preliminary autopsy results concluded that Goliath killed the rider. Then the whoa kicked in. I was no expert, but the medical jargon didn't seem to mention anything about a roller coaster. Besides, government workers seldom speak so bluntly. Possibly the weekend crew wasn't used to obfuscating with the media and had blurted out what a public information officer, mindful of the legal and public relations implications, would have made more nuanced — the ride "may have played a role" or "been a factor" in the death. And if the officials our reporter spoke to later

got cold feet and denied saying what they'd said, Six Flags and the entire thrill ride industry might sue City News for libel. So before updating the Coaster Death story, I asked the reporter to call back the coroner's office a third time to confirm the cause of death.

I also sought a second opinion and called County-USC hospital, where I spoke to an emergency room doctor who told me that aneurysms are usually genetic, meaning the woman probably had a pre-existing condition before she went on the ride. The doctor wouldn't speculate whether whiplash from a roller coaster could cause an aneurysm to burst, and told me his name only after I reassured him that I understood he had no opinion on the accident.

A short time later the reporter called back and said he wasn't able to contact the second coroner's official, but he talked to the first one again, the one who'd used the medical jargon, and this time he said, "It could have been a genetic predisposition, and the ride could have just made it go."

I then told the reporter to call Magic Mountain to let them respond. A short time later he called back and said a Magic Mountain spokesperson had no immediate comment because "This was the first we've heard" of the coroner's conclusion. Good enough, since we already had the theme park's denials of culpability from yesterday. Besides, the night was young.

So I edited the reporter's Coaster Death, 2nd Ld-Writethru, leading with the coroner's office saying the ride killed the woman. I wanted to water it down, but kept coming back to the quote, which was pretty unequivocal.

I used the technical terminology, then set up the official's quote by saying, "In layman's terms, he said 'the ride caused her death.'" I added the information from the USC doctor who said aneurysms are often genetic and that he wouldn't speculate on whether the shaking from a roller coaster could cause one to burst. Which, of course, is how I snuck in the speculation that it caused the rupture. But the story backed up the speculation with the other coroner spokesman's quote about how the ride might have caused a genetic predisposition to "go."

Next came Magic Mountain's earlier reaction, followed by the victim's mother telling other media outlets her daughter had no

known health problems, plus background from yesterday's story, including that the 255-foot-high Goliath includes a "near vertical" 61-degree drop and a top speed of 85 miles an hour. Feeling like I was about to take a plunge of my own, I took a deep breath and hit the "send" button.

About 20 minutes later, AP weighed in with its own story, which used the coroner's medical terminology to explain the cause of death, but not the translation. Even worse, a coroner's spokesperson told AP he didn't know if whiplash could cause an aneurysm to burst. Either AP was wrong or CNS was wrong, and AP wasn't wrong very often. After changing my underwear, I called the main editor at home to let him know I may have stepped into deep doo-doo by reporting the coroner officials' unvarnished comments.

"I wish you hadn't done that," he said rather calmly, all things considered.

He asked me if I had names to go with the quotes, which I did. He paused and said it sounded like things were under control, thanks for giving him the heads-up, and there didn't seem to be any immediate need to write a correction. But the night was still young.

When I got off the phone, I called the reporter and said I hate to do this, but please re-reconfirm the cause of death. I also asked the reporter to break a basic rule of journalism and read the story to the source to give him a chance to clarify anything that didn't jibe.

I was half hoping the coroner's office would retract its earlier statements, even deny them, so I could step back from the precipice. Instead, the reporter said he talked to the second official again, read him the story, and that rather testily the official had responded, "Had she not been on the ride, she would not have been killed, as per the autopsy findings."

Jeez Louise. Even if I had inadvertently put the word "kill" in his mouth by having the reporter read him the story, I now had a "kill" quote to back up CNS' account. So AP be damned, I decided to double down and sent out a Coaster Death, 3rd Ld, with an editor's note saying the coroner's office had reconfirmed its statement that "the ride caused her death."

I waited anxiously for AP to match our story, but it didn't. With CNS and AP having conflicting versions, other news outlets had to

decide whether to trust the largest wire service in the world, or the one where I was at the switch. Would they choose to play it safe or go with the more sensational news? When the 6 o'clock TV newscasts began, some of the stations went with the AP's account while others used CNS', further muddying the waters.

Around 7 o'clock, the head of PR at Magic Mountain called. Here it comes, I thought, I'm about to get creamed. But I realized he was in full damage control mode when he started out by saying, "Obviously, this was a very unfortunate occurrence, and our thoughts and prayers go out to the family."

He went on to say that he hadn't seen the coroner's report, but a coroner's official had told him the death was the result of a pre-existing condition, an aneurysm, which burst during the ride. He added that "any doctor will tell you" walking or running could also cause one to rupture. "The important thing to remember is that she walked onto the ride with a pre-existing condition," he said.

I asked the reporter to call the coroner yet again to get a reaction to Magic Mountain saying a pre-existing medical condition, and not the roller coaster, was the cause of death. A short time later he told me the first two coroner officials had gone home, and the new one said he knew nothing about nothing except that no one would know anything about anything until tomorrow morning. Which was good enough for me. The official hadn't confirmed the comments, but he hadn't denied them, either.

Time to put this puppy to bed. Rewriting the reporter's story and adding in my own reporting, I led with, "Six Flags Magic Mountain tonight disputed reports from the coroner's office that a Fontana woman died from riding the popular Goliath roller coaster." I added the PR guy's quotes about pre-existing conditions, as well as his thoughts and prayers, noted that the coroner's office was unavailable for further clarification, then transmitted the story. Meantime, AP continued to report that the coroner had ruled the death was caused by a pre-existing aneurysm and not whiplash.

I declared victory when the 11 o'clock TV newscasts rolled around, and all three network affiliates led with the roller coaster allegedly causing the woman's death. My favorite was KCBS, which had added a lurid logo: "Death Ride." The TV station got a doctor

from Northridge who went way further than mine, using audio-visual aids to speculate how a roller coaster could pop an aneurysm. KCBS noted that a growing number of people have conked out on the new super roller coasters, prompting some in Congress to call for an investigation.

Time to write the midnight headlines, and I decided I'd done enough damage for one day. So I dropped "kill" and instead wrote: "The popular Goliath roller coaster at Six Flags Magic Mountain in Valencia may have contributed to the death of a 28-year-old Fontana woman. The woman died Saturday after a three-minute ride on the coaster. An autopsy yesterday determined she died from a ruptured brain aneurysm. Aneurysms aren't caused by carnival rides, but a coroner's official said riding the roller coaster might have caused it to burst."

The Monday edition of the *L.A. Daily News* went with the AP version of the story: "An autopsy on a woman who died after riding the Goliath roller coaster at Magic Mountain showed bleeding around the brain stem and a ruptured berry aneurysm of the cerebral artery, officials said Sunday." But the *Los Angeles Times* matched our story with more quotes from the same coroner official — "This was due to an accident on the ride, due to injuries she sustained … It was not a natural cause of death" — and the headline, "Coaster Caused Fatal Injuries, Coroner Says." At some point even AP caved and quoted the same source saying, "The aneurysm may have been a pre-existing condition, but the roller coaster ride caused the fatal injuries."

As I suspected might happen, the coroner's office then retracted all the statements, calling them "premature" pending final autopsy results. The officials no longer said the ride caused the woman's death, or even that she had an aneurysm. It was with trepidation that I tuned in to the evening newscasts to see how they were going to clean up the mess I'd started by asking the reporter to clarify some medical jargon.

Gone were the death ride logos, but the roller coaster was still their lead story, even though the city election was the next day. The cause of death was no longer the ride, but there was "confusion" in the coroner's office and the "mystery" continued. The Magic Mountain spokesman I'd talked to went on camera to describe the coro-

ner's release of information to the media as "unfortunate," and again sent his "thoughts and prayers to the family."

Overwhelmed by curiosity, I called my boss. "It turned out not too bad," he said, knowing what I was calling about before I asked. He said that for a time he had been worried that "we were out there all alone, waiting for the lawyers to call. But everyone ended up going with our version, so I guess it turned out OK."

Two months later, the coroner's office released its final autopsy results, which, the Times *noted, "largely echoed the findings of the coroner's preliminary investigation." In more measured words, the autopsy determined that the woman had a pre-existing brain aneurysm that ruptured during the ride, and that "the stress/strain associated with the roller coaster ride probably was a factor." The woman's family subsequently sued Six Flags, which settled the case for an undisclosed amount of money. Six Flags did not admit responsibility, but since that time, Magic Mountain and other theme parks have posted signs warning people with various medical conditions, including aneurysms, to not go on thrill rides.*

2001
Airport Insecurity

In December 2001, America still had the jitters from 9/11, and nowhere had security been ramped up more than at airports, where the FAA and newly created Transportation Security Administration were making passengers safe from nail clippers and bottled breast milk. My personal opinion was that the new safety procedures were creating more problems than they were solving, but I had no idea...

It was a Sunday afternoon in December, the start of my evening shift at the wire service, and as the previous editor was leaving, he mentioned there was a developing story out of San Diego — the cop reporter there had filed a story about a flight that had been delayed at Lindbergh Field because a hand grenade had reportedly been found on the airplane. The editor put out a story saying "an object resembling a hand grenade" had been found, because it hadn't exploded like a hand grenade. Still, the flight was on hold, airport roads had been blocked and thousands of travelers were stranded as law enforcement tried to sort things out.

To avoid mistakes, careful journalists add qualifiers to stories — "reportedly found," "object resembling." I, on the other hand, tended to push for more specifics. So I called the cop reporter and asked him to find out whether the reported object resembling a hand grenade was a hand grenade or not, fully expecting it to be an object resembling a pine cone that a jumpy flight attendant mistook for a bomb.

But the reporter said the object was indeed a hand grenade, albeit inert. An airport spokeswoman had told him the FAA placed the dummy grenade in a rolled-up sweater and left it in a bag at a security checkpoint near the X-ray machine, not as a practical joke, but to keep the TSA screeners on their toes. However, not only did the screeners miss the grenade, but a non-terrorist passenger either mistakenly or sticky-fingeredly picked up the bag and strolled onto her flight.

As the Chicago-bound American Airlines plane taxied from the terminal, the passenger reached into the overhead bin for the sweater

and was surprised, to say the least, to discover what appeared to be a real live hand grenade. Undoubtedly tongue-tied, she tried to bring the fake weapon to the attention of a flight attendant, but the grenade tumbled out of the sweater and rolled down the aisle of the airplane, where it was seen by other dumbstruck passengers. Needless to say, the pilot aborted takeoff, the woman got a visit from the FBI, and the rest of the passengers were re-screened. Meanwhile, the entire airport and surrounding roads were shut down and thousands of travelers missed their connections as a bomb squad and bomb-sniffing dog were dispatched to check out the airplane. The alleged sweater thief was led away in handcuffs, as if it were her fault.

I was still musing over that security snafu when the Los Angeles cop reporter sent an advisory saying a terminal at Los Angeles International Airport had been evacuated because an object resembling a handgun had slipped through a security checkpoint. I asked the reporter to find out if the object resembling a gun was a gun, and he filed a story about LAX just as bizarre as the one from San Diego, and once again the FAA was the culprit. The gun turned out to be a so-called phantom gun — a fake image of a gun projected on an unwitting passenger's carry-on bag going through an X-ray machine.

LAX was one of a handful of airports with state-of-the-art X-ray machines that periodically projected fake images of weapons on luggage to keep the screeners alert. The screener was supposed to see the image, search the bag for the weapon, and when not finding one, conclude it was a test. Instead, the screener searched the wrong bag, and the unsuspecting passenger with the bag that didn't have a gun in it headed off for his plane.

Authorities evacuated the terminal and searched for the unarmed passenger using a photo from a security camera. Scads of stranded travelers, delayed flights and missed connections later, they found the guy milling around outside along with everyone else. When security pounced on him, "he was surprised," according to an LAX spokeswoman. No weapon was found, but it took three hours before everyone was re-screened, re-planed and belatedly departed.

Days after 9/11, Malcolm Gladwell of *The New Yorker* wrote a piece called "Safety in the Skies" that discussed the "great paradox of law enforcement" — the better the police get at fighting crime, the

more ruthless the criminals become. Just as making better car alarms turned car thieves into carjackers, improving airport security had turned skyjackers into suicide bombers. Two changes that have had the biggest impact on airline security have been re-enforcing cockpit doors and passenger awareness that skyjackers aren't just taking hostages anymore. Much of the rest is what critics call "security theater," expensive and inconvenient shows of security that are meant to reassure travelers without actually improving their safety.

The article noted that the FAA periodically plants weapons in baggage because, "a well-documented principle of human-factors research is that as the 'signal rate' declines, detection accuracy declines as well." In other words, baggage screeners who never see weapons in carry-on luggage are less likely to notice if one does show up. It isn't clear whether dummy grenades and phantom guns improve airport security, but if the incidents in Los Angeles and San Diego are any indication, they don't make life any easier on travelers.

A week after the security fiascoes at San Diego and LAX, a British petty thief and radicalized Muslim named Richard Reid tried to blow up a Paris-to-Miami flight using explosives hidden in his shoe, but was subdued by passengers before he could light the fuse. To this day, passengers are still being asked to remove their shoes at many airports. Imagine what might happen if some fanatic decides to stick the bomb up his ass.

2002
Terrorism Day

Normally, I liked working holidays because it was less work for more pay. But news doesn't take a holiday, and one of the most tumultuous shifts I ever worked was on Independence Day 2002, when a man opened fire at the Israeli airline El Al ticket counter at Los Angeles International Airport. Was it terrorism or not?

Independence Day was normally a milk run. But in the weeks leading up to July 4, 2002, there'd been chatter that it was actually Terrorism Day, when Osama bin Laden and his crew would pull their next 9/11, and LAX was at the top of their hit list. So when a friend told me she had a July 4th invitation to a yacht party at Marina del Rey, just south of the airport, I urged her to attend because it would be a great place from which to watch the radioactive plume.

Actually, I had worked the night of Y2K and nothing untoward had happened, and I wasn't really expecting a terrorist attack at LAX. I figured I'd be doing the usual stories about flag-waving politicians, crotchety vets and how terrorism didn't stop all us brave 'mericans from getting drunk and blowing ourselves up with fireworks. But when I turned on the TV to get my news fix before heading in to the office for the evening shift, CNN was reporting that shortly before noon there had been a shooting at the El Al ticket counter in the Bradley International Terminal at LAX. No way, I thought, and switched to the local stations, which all had helicopters above the scene, showing thousands of stunned and stranded travelers, ambulances, cops and chaos.

I was still staring slack-jawed at the TV when the local station broke into the breaking news with breaking news — a small plane had either swan-dived or dive-bombed into a crowd of picnickers at a beach in San Dimas, about 30 miles away. As with the shooting at LAX, it was unclear whether the crash at the beach was terrorism or not, and whether the two incidents were related.

I called the office to volunteer to come in early and was half-disappointed, half-relieved they'd already called another editor. I hoped

that by the time I got there at 4 p.m. the breaking news would all have broke, and I'd be doing what I usually did on my shift, which was mop up. And when I got to work, two editors and two additional reporters seemed to have had things pretty well in hand. I was given the hourly temps (weather report) and whatever non-LAX non-San Dimas stories that came across.

In the San Dimas plane crash, the pilot and copilot were killed, along with a 12-year-old girl on the ground, and another 15 beachgoers were injured. It did not appear to be terrorism, but a tragic accident. The small plane had taken off from a nearby airport and probably developed an engine problem. The pilot had radioed a Mayday and may have tried to ditch the plane in the lake, but slammed into the crowded beach instead.

The box score at LAX was three dead, including the shooter, and four injured. Authorities said they didn't know who the gunman was, much less why he had opened fire. There were reports he was an Arab, and others said he was a disgruntled El Al employee. Some said he got into an argument with an El Al ticket agent, others said the argument began at a nearby Mexican airline counter and spilled over into the El Al area. By the end of the day, more passengers claimed to have tackled the shooter than attended Woodstock.

Authorities initially said they were searching for two accomplices, then that the shooter had acted alone and the attack did not appear to be terrorist-related. The FBI issued a statement saying there was "no indication of any terrorism connection in this matter right now," and Los Angeles Mayor James Hahn said it "appears this was an isolated incident." Even a spokesperson for President George W. Bush said "nothing suggested it was anything other than a criminal act." But the Israeli minister of transportation, Ephraim Sneh, disagreed. "It's the most logical assumption that when someone opens fire on an El Al counter in an international airport, most likely this is a terror attack," he said on TV.

The day crew at CNS finally cleared out about 6:45 p.m., with the editor giving me some final instructions. It looked like my piece of the big stories would be monitoring the conditions of victims, identifying the dead and updating with whatever details I could glean from TV, radio and our cop reporter. Silly me. About a minute after

everybody split, the reporter who had been dispatched to LAX called. He was waiting for an FBI news briefing in a parking lot near the Bradley Terminal, but he said the assembled media had been ordered to evacuate the parking lot because "it's not safe," and there was a rumor a bomb squad was on the way.

That was big news, but before I could get out a one-sentence advisory, the cop reporter checked in. He'd called the coroner and learned there'd been a fourth fatality in the San Dimas plane crash — a 15-month-old boy. Before I could get out either advisory, the cop reporter called back to confirm that a bomb squad was en route to LAX with K9s and robots. Then the LAX reporter called again, with one more itsy bitsy detail. Seems the parking lot was evacuated because they found the suspect's car, which might contain anything from anthrax to plutonium (actually he didn't say that last part). He said his feeling was that police were just being extra careful and that there was no evidence of explosives in the car, but the bottom line was that they found the gunman's car in the parking lot, which was evacuated while a bomb squad investigated.

After finally getting out the advisories, I needed to update the LAX story, which the day crew had rewritten six times and was 20 inches long, and the San Dimas story, which was on its fourth lede and 10 inches long. As I started to rewrite the stories, I realized the throbbing in my head wasn't just panic, fear and hysteria, but hunger. I grabbed my sack lunch and between sandwich gulps updated the LAX story, re-leading with, "A bomb squad was sent to LAX tonight to investigate a vehicle believed to have belonged to a gunman who opened fire at an Israeli airline ticket counter, killing two and wounding several others before being killed by a security guard."

The LAX reporter called to say the FBI briefing was starting. I checked our wall of TVs to see if any local stations were airing the briefing live. None were, so I turned up the radio, where it was being carried by one of the all-news stations. An FBI agent was serving up some juicy details, like that they'd tentatively identified the suspect, who'd showed up at the airport without any ID or ticket, toting a .38 caliber handgun, 9 mm pistol and a six-inch knife, which he used to stab the El Al security guard who killed him. He also provided an FBI hotline number for anyone with information on the attack.

The LAX reporter called in with his notes and quotes from the briefing, which I typed into the computer on top of my radio notes. He asked if he could go home and I grudgingly said yes, reluctant to lose my eyes and ears at the airport. Next, I cut-and-pasted both our sets of notes into the latest version of the LAX story. But I'd mistakenly stuck the notes into the San Dimas story, so I canceled the file, then realized I hadn't saved the notes in any other file, so they were irretrievably gone.

"Fuck," I yelled so loud it echoed off the walls. When I was working alone, there would often come a moment when I totally lost my temper. But this time I didn't have time to throw a hissy fit. I got up wearily, stretched, took a deep breath, sat back down, called the LAX reporter and told him I was sorry, but I needed him to dictate his notes to me again. No problem, he said, but his cell phone's depleted battery squawked in protest as he went back over his notes, and the clock continued to tick tick tick without CNS having an updated story.

The day editor called to find out how things were going. I lied. She had some minor corrections she'd remembered and I scribbled them down in a notebook. Outside the window with a view of downtown L.A., I could see a fireworks show starting in the distance, but I couldn't enjoy the show because I was so far behind.

Even though the airport shooting was the bigger story, I decided the death of a 15-month-old baby in San Dimas trumped the discovery of the killer's car at LAX, so I tackled, or should I say mis-tackled, the plane crash story first. I should have pushed the story forward by plugging the baby's death into the top of the story. Instead, I merely did the math and changed the numbers — 5th Ld instead of 4th in the slug; four dead instead of three in the lede. I added that the baby had been the brother of the 12-year-old girl who had died and belched it out around 8:45 p.m.

With a San Dimas story finally on the wire, I began updating the LAX story with the new information from the FBI briefing. But the phone kept ringing with reporters from other news organizations asking about a rumored midnight FBI briefing, which City News was supposed to know about. But I'd lost my LAX reporter, and when I called the FBI phone number the cop reporter had given me I got a

recording.

I did a 9th Ld of the LAX story, leading with authorities had tentatively identified the gunman but still had no motive for the attack. Next came the hotline number for witnesses and tipsters, then some he-said she-said on whether it was terrorism. Somehow it took me 12 paragraphs to reveal the suspect's car had been found and a bomb squad sent to LAX. I finally transmitted the story shortly after 10 p.m., but not before the cop reporter filed his last story of the evening, a 6th Ld to the plane crash story.

I opened up the file and the editor's note he'd written spiked my blood pressure yet again: The 15-month-old boy CNS was the first to report as the fourth fatality in the plane crash was *not* the brother of the dead 12-year-old girl. I changed the editor's note to read, "UPDATES authorities NOW say 15-month-old boy NOT related to 12-year-old girl," although I had no idea whether it was the police, the coroner, the cop reporter or I who got it wrong first.

I got out the corrected plane crash story at 10:15 p.m. I had recorded the 10 o'clock news, so I replayed the tape, getting quotes from one of the "blood-spattered" passengers who claimed he'd tackled the gunman. I got that story out two minutes before the 11 o'clock news began, and for the first time felt nearly caught up.

I started writing the midnight heads, which were supposed to be sent between 11:30 p.m. and midnight, figuring if I hustled I could still make that deadline, as long as there was no new news at 11. Instead, the first thing all three TV stations showed was a driver's license picture of the suspect, whom the FBI had identified as a 41-year-old Egyptian-born limousine driver living in Irvine, about 40 miles south of L.A. The second thing they showed was a live shot of authorities searching the suspect's home. All three channels revealed the suspect's name, but none spelled it on the screen, which meant I was screwed. I couldn't add the suspect's name to the story if I couldn't spell it.

Feeling totally out of the loop, I called the cop shop, where a new reporter had started his shift, and he called the FBI and got a recording. He also called Irvine and Orange County authorities, and they told him to call the FBI. I called the FBI myself and also got a recording. I then tried my luck with the Orange County Sheriff's

Department and got a watch commander who told me that for reasons of national security he couldn't confirm for me what I'd just seen reported on three TV channels.

That meant that instead of being able to attribute my information to authorities, at 11:07 p.m. I sent an advisory stating "The FBI, Orange County deputies and Irvine police are searching the home of an Irvine man from Egypt whom they believe may have been the gunman in today's attack at LAX, according to broadcast reports." Translation: The competition beat us to the story, and we couldn't match it with our own sources.

The day editor called again with some info she'd culled from CNN and again asked how things were going. I told her everything had gone to shit over the past five minutes and I hadn't even started the heads. She expressed as close to sympathy as she ever got, told me not to worry about the heads and hinted she might not notice if I happened to find the gunman's name on the AP wire, even though we weren't supposed to steal stuff from AP.

I needed to update the LAX story, but not before making sure I'd caught up with the latest developments on TV, and not before getting the damn gunman's name. While listening for updates on TV, I edited the only bona fide Fourth of July story of the evening, which had been written by the cop reporter hours earlier: "Despite all warnings, at least four people — including a 2-year-old girl — were hurt and 20 small grass fires broke out" in fireworks-related accidents.

I got it out at 11:22 p.m., and by that time the AP had transmitted a story with the gunman's name — Hesham Mohamed Ali Hadayat. At 11:46 p.m. I sent out an 11th Ld- writethru of the LAX story with the new lede based on the 11 o'clock news: "The gunman who killed two people at LAX today before being killed by a security guard was an Egyptian who lived in Irvine and was on an FBI watch list, according to broadcast reports." It turned out he wasn't on any watch list, but that's the way it goes when you rely on broadcast reports.

As soon as I sent out the 11th Ld, the cop reporter sent up an advisory that made the story obsolete — the coroner had released the identity of the third fatality in the airport shooting. I could rush out a 12th lede before midnight, but for the first time the entire shift, I finally got it right. I started from scratch and wrote a sidebar slugged

"LAX Shooting-Fatality IDs" and pounded out a six-paragraph story by 11:55.

Pleased with that effort, I tried another sidebar, LAX Shooting-Gunman, with the new information on the suspect. I was halfway done when the phone rang. It was the head flack for LAX, whose job it was to convince me everything was "back to normal" at the airport. As she relayed the number of flights delayed and passengers inconvenienced, I tried not to be impatient. "Just one more thing," she said. I rolled my eyes. She proceeded to tell me the phone number for the media to contact the FBI 24/7. As I wrote it down, I realized it was the same hotline number we'd reported was for people with information on the attack to use. Somehow it never occurred to me to try it. Dummy.

I wrote another sidebar, "LAX Shooting-Operations," reporting that airport operations were back to normal, but I forgot to add the FBI phone number to the editor's note. Oblivious to how totally fried I was, I finished the LAX Shooting-Gunman sidebar, focusing on the latest info on the suspect being an Egyptian on an FBI watch list, and that his birthday happened to be July 4. I got out the gunman sidebar at 1:05 a.m., and thank goodness it was time for the overnight editor to arrive. But as usual he was late, so I decided to turn around the LAX story.

I re-led with, "Authorities today searched the home of an Egyptian national living in Irvine whom they identified as the gunman who killed two people at LAX before being killed by a security guard." Next I repeated the developments that had occurred during my shift, and added "reportedly" to the phrase "on a watch list." Then I cut the story in half, by deleting the stale quotes off TV and paring down the was-it-terrorism-was-it-something-else debate to a few sentences.

I was still rewriting the story when the overnight editor arrived about 1:10 a.m., and the first thing he asked me was if I'd looked at the *Los Angeles Times* website. When I said I hadn't had time, he started berating me, saying I should always check the *Times* around 11 p.m., which was true.

"Shut the fuck up." The words hung in the air, as I thought to myself, did I really say that out loud? "You have no idea what I've been through," I whined.

"What do you mean?" he asked. "What happened?"

"Nothing," I said, regaining my composure. "It's just been a busy day. So busy I didn't get out the midnight headlines." I realized it was the first time in the five years I'd worked there that I hadn't finished the heads, not to mention my sandwich.

He forgave me for not looking at the *Times* or doing the heads, but at 1:16 a.m. I riled him again when I finished the LAX turnaround and put it on the wire before letting him edit it. He said he knew he was late, but it was his shift and once he was there, no stories should go out without his say-so.

"Unacceptable," he blustered, and he was absolutely right. Editors also need editors, especially an editor at the end of a most hellacious shift. As I dumped the remains of my sandwich in the trash, he pulled up my story on the computer and began editing it. "How is it?" I asked.

"Good," he said. "It's got everything I need. You just should have let me read it first."

Terrorism or not terrorism? The shooting at LAX occurred years before the 2009 Fort Hood shooting and the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing, and the term "self-radicalization" had yet to exist. Under the government's then-definition of terrorism, the attacker had to be connected to a terrorist group, although the Israeli government continued to maintain that the LAX shooter walked and talked like a terrorist. Eventually the FBI agreed, and in a report called "Terrorism 2002/2005," the bureau described the attack thusly:

On July 4, 2002, Hesham Mohamed Ali Hedayat [sic] began shooting randomly while standing in line at the ticket counter of El Al Israeli National Airlines at the Los Angeles International Airport. During the attack, an El Al ticketing agent and a bystander were killed. Hedayat [sic] was subsequently killed by an El Al security officer. A worldwide investigation determined that Hadayat's religious and political beliefs were the primary motivation for the attack, and not personal revenge. Following these investigative findings, this case was officially designated as an act of international terrorism.

On Nov. 1, 2013, another fatal shooting occurred at LAX. Paul Anthony Ciancia, 23, is accused of gunning down a Transportation

Security Administration officer and injuring several other people before being shot by police. TSA Officer Gerardo Hernandez was the first officer to be killed in the agency's 12-year-history. Ciancia, an unemployed motorcycle mechanic, survived. Originally from Pennsylvania before moving to Los Angeles months before, he'd recently told family members he wanted to hurt himself, and during the attack, he carried a note railing against the TSA and New World Order. Terrorism or not terrorism?

2002
Zsa Zsa

Zsa Zsa Gabor was one of the first celebrities to become famous for being famous. With her platinum blond hair, daring décolletage and campy accent — "dah-ling" — she had appeared in a few forgettable movies and been on the '70s TV game show Hollywood Squares. *But the one-time Hungarian beauty queen was mostly known for her many husbands, and for serving three days in jail in 1989 for slapping a Beverly Hills cop, who arrested her for driving without a license, with a flask of Jack Daniels in her $215,000 Rolls-Royce. In many ways Zsa Zsa was a trailblazer for such Hollywood socialites as her distant relation Paris Hilton.*

The day before Thanksgiving 2002, Zsa Zsa Gabor was injured in a car accident near the Sunset Strip. The 85-year-old socialite/actress was riding in a red Corvette driven by her hairstylist when the vehicle struck a light pole. Gabor was taken to the hospital of the stars, Cedars-Sinai Medical Center near Beverly Hills, where she was reportedly in serious condition.

It seemed like a pretty straightforward news item, so when I arrived to work the swing shift on Turkey Day, I was surprised the managing editor had put out a second-day story with nearly as many ledes as Zsa Zsa had husbands. The problem was that Gabor's latest spouse, Frédéric Prinz von Anhalt, had told the Associated Press she was in a coma and he was rushing back from Europe to be by her bedside, which meant a potential celebrity deathwatch situation. The managing editor was having a hard time "matching" the AP story because von Anhalt was on an airplane and the hospital of the stars was notoriously tight-lipped about its patients.

As with all media reports, we were supposed to try to match the AP information with our own sources before doing a pick-up. But if we couldn't, one of the rules at City News was that we couldn't do pick-ups from the AP, i.e., we could never say "according to AP" in a story. Sometimes we'd fudge, using a term like "reportedly" or "according to media reports" and slip in a key AP factoid. But not the

managing editor. So even though it was just Zsa Zsa, and Thanksgiving Day, when nobody follows the news anyway, he had the cop reporter call Germany until he'd tracked down von Anhalt's spokesman, Gerd Birkmann, who confirmed the coma comment. Meantime, the editor kept adding more details and background information, just in case her condition worsened.

The famous-for-being-famous Zsa Zsa had been legally married eight times (and once illegally), including to actor George Sanders and hotelier Conrad Hilton, father of Gabor's only child, Constance Francesca Hilton, and great-grandfather of another famous-for-being-famous celebrity, Paris Hilton. Gabor's latest and longest lasting husband, Prinz von Anhalt, was a German-born socialite 26 years her junior. Born Robert Hans Lichtenberg, in 1980 he became the adult adopted son of Princess Marie-Auguste of Anhalt, enabling him to add "Prinz," i.e., Prince, to his name, and to adopt adult children of his own, who then became titled, presumably for a price. He and Zsa Zsa lived in garish, old Hollywood splendor in a Bel Air mansion that has been used in many movies, including the Oscar-winning *Argo* and the Michael Douglas as Liberace bio-pic *Behind the Candelabra*. Soon, CNS would take anything the prince said with a grain of salt, but at the time, we weren't fully aware of just how sketchy he was. In future years, he would claim to have had an affair with Anna Nicole Smith, announce he was running for governor, glue one of his eyes shut and be found naked in his Rolls-Royce behind a Los Angeles country club, where he said he'd been mugged by a trio of hookers.

Because I knew the managing editor had a family dinner to attend, I arrived for my shift 15 minutes early, but the Zsa Zsa story had taken another turn. KABC-TV had a live camera crew at the hospital, where Gabor's daughter, Constance Francesca Gabor Hilton, was vigorously denying her mom was unconscious. She said Zsa Zsa had a broken arm but no other serious injuries. She also denied a police account that her mom hadn't been wearing a seat belt.

Almost as satisfying as beating AP on a story is exposing its rare mistakes, so even though the editor would be late for dinner, he pounced on Francesca Hilton's quotes — one of them being "no, no, no, no" — and sent out an advisory saying she was denying "media reports" that her mom was comatose.

The phone rang and I picked it up. “City News.”

“Dad?”

“Hang on. It’s someone calling for Dad,” I told the editor, who winced.

Of course it was his son, wanting to know when he would be home for dinner, and the answer was not for a while, because his seventh lede was a writethru, meaning he was going to rewrite the story from top to bottom. He quoted Hilton as saying Zsa Zsa had just been “stunned” in the accident and that she’d be home in a few days. When he finally left for home, he glanced at the AP wire and snorted that AP was still reporting Zsa Zsa was in a coma, although within that snort was just a speck of doubt, a hope and a prayer that his version would hold up.

I settled into the slot, pleased that Zsa Zsa had been put to bed and I could loaf. But the phone rang and it was the managing editor, calling on his cell phone from his car, asking me to go over his story and fix it up if it needed anything. I looked at the story and thought it could use some fixing up, but I wasn’t in the mood. I also blew off a story on “Father Dollar Bill,” a retired priest who on Thanksgiving and Christmas handed out money to the homeless on Skid Row. But the cop shop was sending up a steady stream of three-paragraph stories about holiday car crashes and shootings, so it looked like I was doing my job, until the 11 o’clock news, when KNBC had a fresh interview with Zsa Zsa’s husband, who had arrived at the hospital from Europe. He was no longer saying his wife was in a coma, and conceded she had opened her eyes and was looking around. But he also said she couldn’t talk and it wasn’t clear if she recognized him. Oh crap. Time to do an eighth lede on Zsa Zsa.

What to do? Francesca Hilton was often at odds with the prince — she claimed he was freeloading off her mom, while he claimed she was horning in on her mom’s dwindling estate — and it was a classic he-said, she-said situation. While von Anhalt might be exaggerating Zsa Zsa’s condition for publicity, Hilton might be minimizing her mom’s injuries to avoid a media deathwatch.

I decided to give the accounts of the husband and daughter equal weight. In my midnight heads, I wrote, “Zsa Zsa Gabor is in the hospital, but there are conflicting reports on just how seriously she was

injured in a car crash the day before Thanksgiving." I put the coma report first, then the daughter's denial, and then the husband's more recent description of Zsa Zsa's condition, which I rather clumsily paraphrased as "conscious but not alert."

Which pretty much described most of my nights at the wire service.

At this writing, Zsa Zsa Gabor remained in ill health, but was still living in her Bel Air home, at age 97.

2003
Hail Columbia

Careful journalists report the facts. Reckless journalists push the envelope, wading into interpretation and speculation. Careful journalists make fewer mistakes, while reckless journalists make bolder stories.

On Saturday, Feb. 1, 2003, the oldest of the space shuttles, Columbia, dropped out of the sky like a Texas hailstorm. The Columbia story broke about 6 a.m. Pacific Time, late in the shift of the weekend overnight editor, who was new with the wire service, but a news veteran who'd covered the Challenger disaster 17 years before. With the instincts of a seasoned journalist, he did the right thing — he called the weekend day editor, who came in early, and the two of them worked the story, sending advisories and piecing together the first brief dispatches from other news outlets.

When NASA announced it had lost communication with the shuttle, which was overdue to land, a careful journalist would report the shuttle was missing and the fate of the crew unknown. A careful journalist would wait for debris to be found before reporting the shuttle had broken apart, and wait for NASA or the president to officially pronounce the astronauts dead. (And a careful journalist would never be so insensitive as to slug a story about the shuttle's last flight "Hail Columbia," although that was the title of a 1982 documentary about its first mission.) A reckless journalist, knowing the shuttle had disappeared while traveling at Mach 18, 35 miles above the earth, might report the obvious — that in all probability, the shuttle had disintegrated when it entered the atmosphere, and all aboard were dead.

The day editor was a careful journalist, and he methodically built the story through seven ledes, the first three slugged "Shuttle Missing," and then just "Shuttle" after Columbia's fate had been confirmed by authorities. He reported the basic details about the shuttle's last moments and the search for debris in Texas, background on the seven dead astronauts, local angles about Columbia being built in the Southland, condolence statements from local muckety-mucks, and

that flags on government buildings were at half-staff. (It was the day editor who first told me that the only time flags fly at half-mast is when they are on ships.)

The head of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, a Jewish human rights organization based in Los Angeles, called from Jerusalem to talk about the first Israeli astronaut, who had perished in the accident, and to announce that a Westwood synagogue had scheduled a memorial service. The day editor wrote a sidebar about the Jewish astronaut and had a separate story for CNS' San Diego clients, slugged SD Shuttle, highlighting the fact that another of the astronauts had been born there.

When I arrived at 4 p.m., he was on the phone with the San Diego cop reporter, who'd talked to a local scientist who had some intriguing comments on a possible cause of the accident — foam insulation breaking off from the fuel tank and striking the shuttle's fragile heating tiles on the left wing 82 seconds into the launch two weeks earlier. Being careful, the day editor said he hadn't seen anything about damaged heat tiles and he didn't want to get ahead of the story. But luckily for the reporter, if not for responsible journalism, there was a shift change, and a less careful editor slipped into the slot.

At City News, it was often said that the smartest person in the room was the last person through the door, because that person knew something everyone else in the room didn't. In this case, I had seen slo-mo video on TV of foam chunks hitting the shuttle's wing during takeoff. As soon as the day editor left, I called the San Diego reporter and told him to send me his story.

With the fate of Columbia known, the story was sure to shift to the cause of the tragedy, and the reporter had gotten quite a titillating quote from Michael Wiskerchen, associate director of the California Space Institute at the University of California at San Diego. He'd told the reporter that in 1985, CalSpace researchers involved with the ground transportation of the shuttle Challenger from Edwards Air Force Base in the Mojave Desert to the Kennedy Space Center in Florida discovered that a light rainstorm during transit caused tile damage that "looked like somebody took a shotgun to it." He said that during re-entry, damaged heat tiles could expose the shuttle — and the astronauts — to a plasma plume around the spacecraft that

was 2,300 degrees Fahrenheit.

In his 7th Ld, the day editor had led with local flags at half-staff to honor the astronauts. I decided it was time to move the story forward, from boring facts to sexy speculation. My 8th Ld-Writethru began:

As the Southland mourned the seven astronauts who died today when the space shuttle Columbia broke apart over Texas, the search for a cause geared up, with damaged heat panels a prime suspect.

Heat tiles possibly struck by foam insulation when Columbia lifted off Jan. 16 may have been a factor in today's disaster, said the associate director of the California Space Institute.

"These tiles have great thermal properties, but not great impact properties," said CalSpace Associate Director Michael Wiskerchen, speaking at his Scripps Ranch home.

"They are very soft," Wiskerchen said. "You don't want objects hitting them at high speeds ... the tiles are very sensitive to collision."

I also put in the quote about the shotgun, but I was too busy speculating and let a sentence slip past me at the bottom of the story that, had I noticed it, would have raised a red flag, making me question the credibility of the source, the reporter and the entire story: "CalSpace personnel were involved in finding that faulty heat tiles were to blame for the Challenger's 1986 disaster, Wiskerchen said." I knew damn well that O-rings, not heat tiles, were blamed for the Challenger explosion, but the fog of news was setting in.

A couple of TV stations called wanting to know where memorial services would be held on Sunday, so I started to call local houses of worship. Then it occurred to me that the Christians should be calling me instead of the other way around. Who was I to choose which congregation would get the media pop? First call, first served, I decided, and so far, the only guys who had called were my guys, the Jews, so I sent out an advisory about the memorial service at the temple in Westwood, just to have something.

Next I got a call from a harried aide to Rep. Diane Watson, whose district included part of South-Central. The aide wanted to know if I'd gotten her fax announcing that Watson was flying back to LAX

from Washington, D.C., to meet with students at her alma mater, Dorsey High School in Compton. Driving to work, I'd heard on the radio that the congresswoman had helped Dorsey students participate in one of the 80 science projects that had been aboard Columbia. I grabbed the fax, which described a silkworm experiment the students had conducted with students from China, and which they had personally placed aboard Columbia before it took off on its fatal mission.

Watson's staff had previously set up an event for Sunday that was to have been a warm and fuzzy photo op with the students bragging about their experiment. Now they had to recalibrate. The aide said the congresswoman would meet privately to comfort the students before facing the media.

I shot off an advisory announcing Watson would meet with the students tomorrow and started to work up a story. But I wasn't the only one hungry for the story about the kids' silkworm experiment. Within minutes I got calls from two TV stations saying the phone number in my advisory was wrong. I checked the release and had the number right, but hadn't noticed that penciled in at the bottom was a weekend number. I gave him the weekend number and REFILED the advisory with the WEEKEND phone number.

I dashed off a quick sidebar, Shuttle-Dorsey, and got it on the wire. A few minutes later the phone rang again, and this time it was an editor from the *Los Angeles Times* — the weekend phone number didn't work either. I read the phone number to her and she said I'd written the wrong area code. I apologized and she said that's OK, it's been that kind of a day. But I had to send a RE-REFILING of the advisory providing both the WEEKEND phone number AND correct area code.

After fixing the phone number in the editor's note on the Dorsey sidebar, I glanced down at the lede and to my horror realized it read, "A science experiment partly created by students at Dorsey High School in South Los Angeles was on the space shuttle Challenger ..." Aaargh! I had to resend the story with yet another succinct editor's note: SUBS Columbia sted Challenger 1st graf.

As my shift neared its end, I needed to get out the midnight heads, six three-sentence stories and the weather for use by rip-and-read radio deejays. I led with the memorial service in Westwood for

the astronauts. For the second item, I noted that investigators said there was no indication the tragedy was caused by terrorists, and that chunks of foam insulation may have damaged heat tiles on a wing during takeoff, causing Columbia to break apart when it re-entered the atmosphere.

The phone rang and it was a woman from the local Baha'i Center. She wanted to get out the word that they were holding a memorial service for the astronauts Sunday morning. When I asked how she found her way to City News, she said a TV station had referred her. Local news outlets sometimes did that when they wanted to give someone the brush off, and Baha'i, which began in Persia and is kind of the Unitarianism of the Islamic world, was not exactly a major denomination. But first call, first served. I chuckled as I wrote an advisory alerting the media that in addition to the afternoon service at the Jewish temple, there'd be a morning memorial at the Baha'i Center. They'll never know what hit them, I thought as I sent the advisory and added it to the next day's budget.

When the overnight editor returned shortly after midnight on Sunday, he told me about his experience covering the first shuttle disaster. He said he had been in the New Hampshire classroom of the first teacher in space, Christa McAuliffe, expecting to do a human interest story with her students, when the Challenger blew up 73 seconds after takeoff. He also said the main thing he learned from the experience was that in major crash investigations, the first reports of causes almost always turn out to be wrong.

His first shuttle story went out at 4:33 a.m., and when he reported on the cause, he filtered my speculation through the lens of his own experience, noting that early theories were based on limited evidence. He noted that other possible causes under investigation included a failure of the automated flight control system, a breakdown of the insulating tiles, a malfunction or fire inside a wing or a failure of the wing structure. "And all cautioned that first indications of causes in major crashes often turn out to be red herrings," he added.

He left in the quotes from the CalSpace scientist, and when he got to the part about light rain damaging the tiles like a shotgun blast, he added a nice detail: "Also that year, NASA postponed a mission by the shuttle Discovery after woodpeckers poked holes in the foam

as the spacecraft awaited lift-off."

At 8 a.m. there was another changing of the guard, and the careful day editor returned to the slot. At 9:43 a.m. he got out an advisory that Rep. Watson would meet with the high school students at 3 p.m. in her office. Two minutes later he sent out his Shuttle, 1st Ld, and son of a gun if those flags weren't back at half-staff: "Flags were at half-staff today here and nationwide as the country mourned the loss of the seven astronauts on Columbia, which disintegrated over Texas as the shuttle was coming in to land in Florida."

Gone was CalSpace, heat tiles and all my speculations, along with the overnight editor's analysis. In other words, he got rid of most everything except the local angles. Shortly before his shift ended at 4 p.m., he got out a localized version for the San Diego clients, and guess what, flags were flying at half-staff there, too.

When I returned for the swing shift and saw what the day editor had done to the shuttle story, I wasn't surprised, and promised myself that I'd also stick to the local angles this time around. But then the San Diego reporter sent another CalSpace story. Once again Wiskerchen was talking up fuel tank insulation and damaged heat tiles, and once again I took the bait: "Investigators looking for the cause of the space shuttle Columbia's disintegration should focus on heat tiles struck during takeoff, the man who headed the (sic) investigation into the Challenger said today."

Again I missed a signal from the reporter that he was playing fast and loose with the facts — I should have edited "the" investigation to "an" investigation.

Next came a fresh Wiskerchen quote: "After listening to reports this morning about the heat tiles, this will be the key thing. There are too many indications not to look seriously at the heat tiles. I'm sure the teams are looking at this now."

I was doing one last quick read-through before sending it to the wire when I noticed the reporter had repeated the line about Wiskerchen saying faulty heat tiles caused the Challenger disaster. My heart sank. I called the San Diego reporter and read the suspicious sentence. "Why would he say heat tiles caused the Challenger to explode? Wasn't that caused by O-rings? Could you call back Mr. Wiskerchen and get a clarification?"

From the other end of the phone I could hear what sounded like someone pretending to shuffle papers. “Let me look through my notes first,” the San Diego reporter said. More shuffling. “It’s not in my notes,” he said. Wiskerchen had said he’d headed one of the investigations into the Challenger disaster, but not that heat tiles caused the accident, which the reporter had apparently made up whole cloth.

The 5 o’clock TV newscasts began, and they all led with memorial services. The reporters did standups outside the service at the Jewish temple, which was in progress, but they also showed video from the earlier Baha’i service.

They also had stories on Rep. Watson’s meeting with the high school students, along with a USC professor who also had an experiment aboard the shuttle. I cribbed quotes and wrote a sidebar, Shuttle-Experiments, then stole more quotes off TV for a memorial story. I got in a couple quotes from the Baha’i service, and then rounded the bases, starting with the spanking brand new 12-story, $200 million futuristic Our Lady of Angels Cathedral, where “seven candles were placed in front of the alter altar with a picture of Columbia’s crew.” At the Rev. Robert Schuller’s Crystal Cathedral in Orange County, “a children’s choir sang ‘Amazing Grace,’ with six American flags and one Israeli flag representing the dead astronauts.” I also noted that prayers were offered for the astronauts at the First AME Church in South Los Angeles: “We go beyond this to the tomorrow the astronauts were reaching for,” said the Rev. Cecil Murray. “They were going into a whole new dimension, the 21st, 22nd century, so we join them in that enterprise.”

I thought about redoing the mainbar, but decided why bother? The day editor had unsaid it all, and the sidebars were more useful anyway.

Time to do the midnight headlines, and this time I zeroed in on the most macabre aspect of the tragedy: “Were the fates of the seven astronauts aboard the space shuttle Columbia sealed seconds after takeoff? During the launch, a piece of foam insulation broke from the fuel tank and struck the left wing, possibly damaging fragile tiles meant to keep the shuttle from burning up on re-entry. At the time, NASA officials decided it was not a problem worth stopping the mission for ... but if the wing was damaged during blastoff, they say

there was no way the astronauts could have fixed the problem once they were in orbit ... that the crew would have been doomed from the beginning of the mission."

Three different editors, three different slants to the same story. While some might call that confusing — that none, or at best, one of us, knew what the heck we were doing — I'd call it the marketplace of ideas. Our clients got a smörgåsbord of mainbars and sidebars to choose from, depending on their own proclivity for carefulness or risk-taking.

The phone rang. It was the lady from the Baha'i Center who had called the night before, and she was beside herself. She said that last year they'd held a worldwide Baha'i convention in New York City with delegates from 92 countries and didn't get near the media coverage they'd gotten for their shuttle memorial service. I just smiled.

On Aug. 26, 2003, the Columbia Accident Investigation Board issued its final report, which found the cause of the Columbia tragedy to be damaged heat tiles on the left wing caused by chunks of insulating foam that struck the wing during launch. It was further revealed the fragile tiles had been damaged during other shuttle missions, but NASA decided it was not a mission-critical problem.

There's been a lot of second-guessing about whether the astronauts could have been saved if NASA had taken the problem more seriously. It's been suggested the astronauts could have conducted an unscheduled spacewalk to inspect the wing and jerry-rig a repair, or a second shuttle might have been pressed into service to attempt a rescue. Both options were extremely risky, if not reckless, and NASA chose the careful option, which was to do nothing. The last of the shuttles was taken out of service in 2011.

2005
Arlington West

In the summer of 2005, America was embroiled in two wars. One was seemingly a war of necessity in Afghanistan, in response to 9/11. The other was seemingly a war of choice in Iraq, in response to oil and neocon hubris. But sometimes the facts get in the way of a good story.

I got pissed off on the Fourth of July. I was working the holiday swing shift, but that wasn't why I was pissed. It had been a slow news day — no terrorism at the airport — so there was heavy TV coverage of holiday observances, including patriotic parades, pyrotechnics and military tributes, but that didn't bother me, either. However, one story had to do with "Arlington West," a display of crosses on the beach in Santa Monica, one for each soldier, sailor or Marine who had died in the Iraq war.

Nearly every weekend since February 2004, the local chapter of Veterans for Peace — many of them Vietnam vets — had erected a growing grid of crosses on the sand just north of the Santa Monica Pier. According to the VFP website, the purpose of the display was "to acknowledge the costs and consequences of the addiction to war as an instrument of international policy," and in particular, the costs and consequences of the two-year-old war in Iraq.

Over 15 months, the display had ballooned from about 500 grave markers to more than 1,700, taking over more and more of the beach and becoming a visually powerful antiwar statement. Mute, stark, respectful and haunting, it had drawn the attention of the media, and over the holiday weekend, candles were placed at each of the markers and the names of all the deceased soldiers were read aloud. But it seemed to me the TV stations weren't letting the facts get in the way of a patriotic July 4th story. To me, it seemed the media had changed the message of the display from "support the troops, bring them home," to "support the troops, support the war," and that pissed me off.

Had I been at home, I might have growled at the TV and thrown

a shoe. But being at work, it occurred to me that I was in a position to provide some counter-programming. I wondered if the organizers of the memorial were as pissed as I was that their message had been turned inside out, and maybe I could get a quote to hang a story on.

So I went on the Veterans for Peace website, found a contact number for Vietnam veteran Ed Ellis, and left a message on his cell phone. A couple hours later, Ellis called me as he was driving through a canyon, so our conversation was disjointed and full of static. Which may partly explain why, when I tried to ask him about the media's reinterpretation of the memorial, he didn't seem to understand what I was getting at. I said everyone was reporting how the display was a tribute to the troops, but not a protest against the war, and he said, well, it is a tribute to the troops.

We got cut off but he called back and I tried again. Wasn't he upset that people were taking the display the wrong way? He said yeah, they recently took "Arlington West" to the Vietnam Memorial, where some people accused Veterans for Peace of being unpatriotic.

After another cut-off, he called me a third time, and I gave it one more try, asking him if he thought the media was misrepresenting the meaning of the display. He said he saw a talk show on Fox where one pundit criticized the memorial for focusing on casualties instead of winning the war, but that another called it a moving tribute to the troops.

"But isn't it an antiwar statement as much as it is a tribute to the troops?" I asked.

Again he didn't seem to get my point.

"So it doesn't piss you off that on Independence Day, the media is suddenly portraying Arlington West as a tribute to the troops rather than a protest against the war?" I asked.

"No," he said.

Since he hadn't answered my question the way I wanted, I couldn't write the story the way I wanted. But damn if I was going to write it the way TV had been reporting, so in frustration I spiked it.

Driving home after work, I got pissed again when one of the news radio stations replayed a phone interview with a local soldier in Iraq — I think he was a colonel from Glendale — who said the media wasn't giving an accurate picture of all the progress that was being

made. “Iraq isn’t Vietnam,” he said.

As the journalist H.L. Mencken once said, “When somebody says it’s not about the money, it’s about the money,” and that’s what I thought every time someone said Iraq wasn’t Vietnam.

I got even more pissed when the colonel from Glendale, mouthing the company line, said we were fighting terrorists in Iraq so that we didn’t have to fight them at home. “Iraq isn’t Afghanistan,” I yelled at the radio.

The one good thing that came out of the Vietnam War — besides the ’60s — was that America learned a hard lesson in humility. We’re no better than any other empire at imperialism, colonialism, nation-building or whatever you want to call it. There are limits to even a super power’s power.

But many Americans are still in denial about Vietnam and learned the opposite lesson, or myth, known as the Vietnam Syndrome. America didn’t lose; crippled by antiwar protests at home, we fought them with one hand tied behind our back. We just weren’t “resolute” enough, as President George W. Bush liked to say. As if napalm, carpet bombing, hamletization, defoliation, My Lai, the Phoenix Project, 11 years and 58,249 names on the Vietnam Memorial weren’t resolute enough. Let’s try torture.

Those who served in Vietnam are like our canaries in the coal mine. When the Iraq War began, some got Vietnam flashbacks and warned us with crosses in the sand. As the display grew, maybe some of them also got Vietnam Memorial flashbacks. Many Vietnam vets feel like they didn’t get the support they deserved, both during and after the war, and if they didn’t want to appear to be not supporting today’s troops in Iraq, I was willing to cut them more than a little slack. And if, to keep up morale, that colonel from Glendale, and the thousands of troops with him in Iraq, needed to believe they were fighting the war on terrorism, I could cut them total slack as well. If only it were true.

After I calmed down, I realized I could have handled Arlington West like a “cyclical” story. Periodically, news outlets do articles on the top 10 movies at the box office, the price at the pump, the jobless rate, stock market trends and real estate prices. Surely the number of service personnel killed in Iraq was as newsworthy as the percentage

of households that could afford to buy a median-priced home. So my version of the Arlington West story might have looked something like this:

Volunteers set up 1,743 crosses in the sand at Santa Monica over the Independence Day weekend, each one representing a U.S. service person killed in Iraq.

That's 12 more grave markers than there were last week, said Ed Ellis of Veterans for Peace, which organizes the weekly display.

So far this month, two Americans have died in Iraq, according to the Pentagon.

Last month, 78 U.S. service personnel died in Iraq, compared to 42 in June 2004. During the first six months of 2005, 411 Americans have been killed in Iraq, up 35 fatalities, or 9.3 percent, from the 376 Americans killed in Iraq over the same period last year.

Seemed like news to me. But I figured I'd have to clear it with my superiors before sending out something like that. The Bush administration was pretty sensitive about coffins, and someone might complain that focusing on casualties was unpatriotic and harmed the war effort. That it would be too much like "body count" stories during the Vietnam War. Meanwhile, Arlington West continued to grow.

By the time President Barack Obama removed the last combat troops from Iraq in 2012, 4,486 had been killed, and thousands more physically or emotionally scarred. In the 12 years that combat troops have been in Afghanistan, more than 2,300 Americans have died. Together, that's more than twice the number of deaths in the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Raiding a house, not in Afghanistan, but Pakistan, a couple dozen Navy Seals finally took out the architect of 9/11, Osama bin Laden, on May 2, 2011. Are we safe yet?

2009
Dick or Tits?

Sometimes the devil is in the lack of details.

When I arrived for my Sunday evening shift on Oct. 25, 2009, the day editor had picked up a story from the *Los Angeles Times* slugged "Offensive Twitter." According to the story, a UCLA football player had tweeted a racial epithet about his coach. Neither our pick-up nor the *Times* revealed the slur or the respective races of the player and coach.

A basic rule of journalism is to not identify a person's race — or religion, gender, sexual orientation, disability, immigration status and the list goes on — unless it's germane to the story. The reason is that before the rule, crime stories in particular would often mention the minority status of a suspect, as in, "a black man robbed a liquor store," and such details can contribute to stereotyping. But in the age of political correctness, sometimes journalists leave out race and other sensitive details even when they are germane. Careful journalists err on the side of vagueness, while I leaned the other way.

One time a reporter turned in a story about a vandal accused of committing a hate crime at a house of worship, but left out the race and religion of the suspect and target, as well as the nature of the epithet. Who hated whom? Was it a burning cross, swastika or desecrated Quran? Careful journalists try to avoid inflaming ethnic frictions, but enquiring minds want to know.

For reasons best left unstated, when I was on the desk, the editor would tend to funnel the more lurid sex crime stories my way. One of my less endearing traits was to call a reporter and ask, "dick or tits?" In response, I'd usually get a reference to the company's workplace harassment policy. But what I wanted to know was whether the suspect or victim was male or female. For example, in stories about teachers having sex with students, sometimes a reporter wouldn't reveal dick or tits. Does it make a difference if the teacher is male and the student female, or vice versa? And what if the teacher and student are of the same sex? Is that germane to the story, or is it prurient? We

may have one set of emotions about a man having sex with a girl and another about a woman having sex with a boy, and still another about same-sex sex, and some of those feelings may be sexist, homophobic or perverted. Some journalists will provide just the information they think readers need to know. I tried to give them what I thought they wanted to know, which, in cases of teacher-student sex, was dick or tits.

In the story about the football player who'd tweeted a racial epithet, both the *Times* and our pick-up used an edited version of the player's tweet: "man oregon, stanford and cal should have been easy wins ,, but [expletive] thys [racial slur] norm chow dnt be trustin us ,, so it is what it is."

When I read the story, I assumed a white player had called a black coach the n-word, because the n-word was the only slur I could imagine that would trigger a news story (this was before saying "fag" could also get you in the news). But a quick look at the team's website revealed that the player was not white, but black, and the coach was not black, but Asian/Hawaiian. And when I dug up the original tweet, the player hadn't used the n-word per se, but a similar word that begins the same way but ends in an "a." A word that, whether Oprah likes it or not, is sometimes used interchangeably with "chick" or "dude" and can be a term of endearment, not servitude.

Here's the unexpurgated tweet: "oregon, stanford, and cal should have been easy wins ,, but shyt thys nigga norm chow dnt be trustin us ,, so it is what it is"

This was a classic case of not letting the facts get in the way of a good story. Because the only way the mostly white sports reporters could make the tweet sound incendiary was to omit the race of the tweeter. Otherwise, the story might be viewed as a bunch of white guys trying to shame a black guy for using the n-word — the white man's revenge.

At that point I could have piled on by looking up more of the player's tweets and probably found other examples of him using the so-called n-word, or I could have tried to tamp down the fire by revealing the races of the player and coach and explaining the difference between nigga and the n-word. When the *Times* posted an update on its website, I redid the story by saying a black foot-

ball player who had called his Asian-American coach a variation of the n-word would not be punished, but that UCLA's head coach had warned him to be careful with social media. Good tip.

Because of political correctness, what should have been a minor sports story about a frustrated pass receiver venting about a coach had been turned into a gotcha story. Dick or tits? Details matter, sometimes even politically incorrect ones, because when left out, the reader fills them in anyway.

2007
1 Weekend on Paris

In the following immorality tale, words like Journalism, Media and News have been capitalized to distinguish them from "journalism," although telling the difference is ever more difficult. As the Internet became ubiquitous, and metropolitan newspapers and TV News channels found themselves competing for eyeballs with Matt Drudge, TMZ and Perez Hilton, many Journalists became conflicted about becoming journalists who were chronicling the lives of such rich and famous hotties as Nicole Richie, Lindsay Lohan, Britney Spears and Paris Hilton.

Nowhere was the agony felt more than at the vaunted Associated Press, which on Feb. 13, 2007, declared a ban on Paris Hilton stories: "Barring any major, major news, we are not going to put a single word about Paris on the wire," an editor wrote in an internal email memo with muddled wording that soon became public. "Hopefully we will be able to discuss what 'news' we missed," the memo continued, "the repercussions of our blackout for AP both editorially and business-wise, and most importantly the force that cause the world to be fixated on this person who, despite her shallow frivolity, represents an epochal development in our culture."

For as long as there have been rich and famous celebrities there have been celebrity scandals, and Paris has had her share, beginning with the 2003 leak to the Internet of a homemade sex tape, 1 Night in Paris*, during which she interrupted coitus to answer her cell phone. To the delight of journalists and the not rich and famous, she and her celebrity BFFs began to have scrapes with the law, mostly traffic-related, and over time, the media, followed by the Media, portrayed them as a coven of modern-day witches who should be burned at the stake. Only instead of being shunned, they were hounded by "stalkerazzi," and their every slip or fling became a gotcha story and worldwide obsession.*

AP's Paris ban lasted less than two weeks, until she was ticketed for driving on a suspended license, and less than a year after that, on Jan. 8, 2008, AP staffers received another edict that soon became

public: "Now and for the foreseeable future, virtually everything involving Britney is a big deal. That doesn't mean every rumor makes it on the wire. But it does mean that we want to pay attention to what others are reporting and seek to confirm those stories that WE feel warrant the wire. And when we determine that we'll write something, we must expedite it."

City News was a News agency, but it was also caught in the shifting sands of Journalism. CNS didn't have photographers staking out celebrities' homes or reporters hacking their phones, but a lot of rich and famous hotties hung out in Hollywood, which was part of CNS' coverage area. The general rule was that the private lives of public figures weren't News unless their names showed up on a police blotter, divorce decree or court order. So, for example, we wouldn't report that Britney wasn't wearing underwear, or that Paris and Lilo had become frenemies for kissing each other's boyfriends when they weren't kissing each other. But if they got a traffic ticket they were fair game, although we were expected to keep the snarkiness to a minimum.

In the spring of 2007, all four hotties were making Headlines as well as headlines. Reality TV star Nicole Richie, 25, was facing jail *time for a December 2006 DUI in which she'd driven the* wrong way *on a Burbank freeway (she eventually served 82 minutes in detention). Actress Lindsay Lohan, 21, was also facing DUI, cocaine and other charges for driving her Mercedes into a hedge in Beverly Hills (her probation in that case was repeatedly extended for various violations). Pop star Britney Spears, 25, was behaving erratically as she struggled through her messy divorce and custody battle with rapper Kevin Federline. And then there was Paris Hilton ...*

When I came into work on Saturday afternoon, June 9, 2007, the editor I was relieving said it had been a quiet day, including on the Paris Hilton beat. Normally there wouldn't be a Paris Hilton beat, but the celebutante had been in and out and back in jail for violating her probation for a traffic infraction, and the media were monitoring her every bowel movement.

Paris Hilton was one of those rich and famous people whom people who are not rich and famous love to hate. The sometime

model, singer, actress and entrepreneur was mainly a "socialite," which meant she liked to party with other rich and famous people. Lust and envy. What other explanation could there be for the orgy of vitriol that had rained down on Hilton as she got her comeuppance, not just for driving on a suspended driver's license, but for being a rich bitch?

She was catnip to the public, and for journalists, the 26-year-old blond beauty was a meal ticket. But for Journalists, she was a pain in the ass. Don't get me wrong. As a news consumer, I couldn't get enough of Paris, Lilo and the whole Brit Pack. But as an editor at a News agency that had a sign on the wall that said "get it first, but first get it right," covering Paris Hilton was a pain because it often meant getting dubious information second, and from dubious sources like the kids at TMZ, a celebrity gossip and news website started by Harvey Levin, the attorney-turned-showrunner of TV's *The People's Court* and *Celebrity Justice*. TMZ is insider slang for the Thirty Mile Zone of movie studios around Hollywood, and the website earned its journalistic chops by being the first to report Mel Gibson's "anti-Semitic rant" during a drunken driving arrest in July 2006. Since then, TMZ had morphed into a TV show and been the first to break or report key aspects of comic Michael Richards' racist tirade, the Anna Nicole Smith saga and O.J. Simpson's repo caper in Las Vegas. TMZ also served up scoops on Paris Hilton, and Journalists had to start monitoring the website to keep up on the news, if not the News.

The time was 4:09 p.m. To my right I heard the printer clack, which meant a new file had entered the computer system. In addition to stories from reporters, a variety of other things pop up on the printer, including weather reports and press releases. I glanced at the printer and saw it was a press release from the PR Newswire. Often written by company publicists and put directly on the wire, most stories on the PR Newswire never get used, and I was about to turn back to the sobriety checkpoint story I was editing when the headline caught my eye: "Statement from Paris Hilton." I groaned. Even behind bars, *The Simple Life* star was complicating life for everyone else.

It all began on Sept. 7, 2006, at the end of what had been a typical day in the life of Paris Hilton. The heiress to the Hilton hotel fortune

had spent the previous day filming a music video before going to a charity event sponsored by Jane's Addiction guitarist Dave Navarro, where, she later told Ryan Seacrest on his radio show, she had one margarita. With friend Kimberly Stewart — daughter of rocker-turned-crooner Rod Stewart — she then got in her Mercedes-Benz McLaren SLR and on the way home decided to go to a Hollywood eatery, In-N-Out Burger, a competitor of Carl's Jr., for which she'd made a steamy commercial. Shortly after midnight, she was stopped by the LAPD for "driving erratically." The 5-foot-8-inch, 115-pound Hilton's blood-alcohol measured .08 percent, the state's minimum threshold for drunken driving, and she was taken to the Hollywood station. Shortly after 2 a.m. she was picked up by her sister, Nicky Hilton, Nicky's boyfriend — *Entourage* star Kevin Connolly — and Paris' publicist. A watch commander at the Hollywood station told TMZ that Paris received no special treatment, although she was not held for the standard minimum of three hours because the paparazzi had shown up and created a traffic hazard.

Initially charged with DUI, she later pleaded no contest to a reduced misdemeanor charge of alcohol-related reckless driving and her license was suspended. But girls will be girls, and Paris kept driving on her suspended license. Once she was pulled over by the California Highway Patrol, and then again by the LAPD, for driving her Bentley without headlights on the Sunset Strip.

Her traffic infractions came to the attention of Los Angeles' politically ambitious city attorney, Rocky Delgadillo, whose purview included prosecuting violators of city ordinances, traffic laws, misdemeanors such as alcohol-related reckless driving, and violations of probation on such misdemeanors. The city attorney was so assiduous at getting his name in the News that I dubbed his press releases the Daily Delgadillo. Recognizing he might score political points among haters of the rich and famous, he decided to "treat Paris like everyone else," which meant he held a press conference to announce he was going to seek a sentence of 45 days in jail. A 45-day jail term for violating probation on a nonviolent misdemeanor is an option under the law, but one that is seldom employed in gang-infested Los Angeles, where the jails are already bursting with violent criminals.

To the further dismay of Hilton's attorney, her family and the

heiress, who all thought she would eventually be sentenced to some form of public service, like cleaning up trash on the side of a road, Paris also had the misfortune of coming before Los Angeles Superior Court Judge Michael T. Sauer, a journeyman jurist and Reagan appointee whose courtroom demeanor matched his name. He not only agreed to a 45-day sentence (23 days with credit for "good time"), but stipulated she had to serve her entire time in jail — that home confinement or public service work were not an option.

The announcement that Paris was going to jail set off a frenzy among the media and everyone who hated the rich and famous. But perhaps the happiest person was another rich and famous celebrity — Lindsay Lohan — who had recently checked back into rehab, this time in Malibu. Apparently a photo of Paris behind bars was worth more than Lindsay in rehab, because most of the paparazzi decamped from tony Malibu and reconstituted outside the squalid women's jail in South L.A. Making a smooth transition, Hilton subbed for Lilo at the MTV Music Awards on Sunday night, June 3, where she said she was scared but ready to serve her sentence. Still in makeup, she ducked out of the award show and snuck into jail a day early. The paps were denied their perp walk money shot, and many complained that her official mug shot was not undignified enough.

At this point, news and News collided. The News was that violence and lack of medical and other services were pervasive in Los Angeles County jails, largely because the jails were critically understaffed and overcrowded, not only with people serving time for misdemeanors, but nut cases, druggies, transients and violent felons who were supposed to be in state prisons except they were also overcrowded. Under a federal court order to make room for more dangerous criminals, and protect the rest from them, L.A. County Sheriff Lee Baca instituted a controversial early release program in which thousands of people convicted of nonviolent misdemeanors were let out of jail after serving as little as 10 percent of their sentences, i.e., revolving-door justice.

But the news was whether the rich bitch would get the star treatment or "be treated like everyone else." There was already grumbling that as a "high-profile" prisoner, Paris was being held in solitary confinement instead of gen pop, where she would have had an equal

opportunity to be gang-raped.

The sheriff, faced with a media circus outside, overcrowded and dangerous conditions inside, and a high-profile prisoner whose mental and physical condition appeared to be deteriorating, did what he'd done with thousands of other nonviolent misdemeanants, which was to spring Paris early. Despite the judge's order, after Hilton was behind bars for three days, he "reassigned" her to home detention at her Tuscan bachelorette pad in the Hollywood Hills. In other words, the sheriff grounded her. But her reassignment was met by howls of derision by the media, as well as the unrich and unfamous.

Meanwhile, Baca was still under a cloud for allegedly giving Mel Gibson the star treatment a year earlier, when the actor and director was arrested in Malibu on suspicion of DUI and made some intemperate observations about Jews and women. The sheriff did not think Gibson's anti-Semitic, sexist and lewd comments were relevant to his DUI arrest, and made sure they were not in the incident report that was released to the public. In fact, the released report went as far as to state that the arrest had been "without incident." But Gibson had uttered his anti-Semitic remarks to a deputy who happened to be of the Jewish persuasion (and to a female deputy, whom he'd called "sugar tits") and the deputy's unexpurgated arrest report found its way to the aforementioned Harvey Levin of TMZ, who also happened to be Jewish. Once the actor/director's comments were exposed by TMZ, Gibson got the full Hymietown treatment, and Sheriff Baca took heat for showing favoritism to celebrities.

The sheriff also handled Hilton's release clumsily, improbably claiming that before she was incarcerated, he didn't know who she was. And instead of saying he was treating her like every other misdemeanant in his overcrowded jails, which would have drawn renewed attention to revolving-door justice, he said he sent her home for undisclosed medical reasons and alluded to mental problems, leaving the media to wildly speculate, as the *New York Daily News* did, that the heiress was "so terrified guards would snap a cell phone picture of her on the toilet that she didn't eat or drink for three days," and others to opine she might be going through drug withdrawals. (Paris later told Larry King she had panic attacks brought on by claustrophobia.)

Among those expressing outrage at Hilton's early release was City Attorney Rocky Delgadillo, who immediately petitioned the court to have the heiress returned to the hoosegow, and have the sheriff cited for contempt for modifying the judge's sentence. Judge Michael T. Sauer was also miffed, especially after he read on TMZ that someone told Hilton she would be treated like every other misdemeanant and did not have to be in court for the hearing. He ordered her to get her "ass to court," to use TMZ's description, and further ordered the sheriff's department to pick her up, setting off another media scrum of chase cars and helicopters. In a scene reminiscent of the O.J. Simpson slow-speed chase so endemic to the L.A. Media as well as media, Hilton's ride in a squad car from the Hollywood Hills to the downtown courthouse was shown live on TV.

Paris had been in jail for three days, out for one, told she could stay home from Friday morning's court hearing, then told she was going back to jail, and the stalkerazzi finally got their money shot. There she was, handcuffed in the back of a police car, crying. The ice princess had cracked. When the judge made it official, she also lost her composure in the courtroom, crying "Mom, Mom, it's not right!" conflated by the media to "cried for her mother."

Rather than returning Hilton to her old cell, the sheriff placed her in a medical unit in the downtown jail, which set off another round of howls that Paris was getting better treatment than all the other crazies behind bars. It was also reported that it was costing the county more than $1,000 a day to keep her in the medical unit, compared to about $100 a day at the women's jail (and $0 for home confinement). As if the sheriff didn't have enough problems, fresh from scalping nappy Don Imus, the Rev. Al Sharpton was headed to L.A. to demand a meeting and blast him for treating an attractive white female better than poor inmates of color.

City News was dutifully covering the comings and goings of Paris Hilton, but we weren't stalking the story and were mostly recycling scoops from news outlets like TMZ. Until I glanced at the printer on Saturday afternoon and saw "Statement from Paris Hilton." Earlier I said I groaned, but truth be told, a shot of adrenaline coursed through me as well. I may have been a Journalist, but I knew news when I saw it.

I opened up the press release on my computer screen, and there it was, a surprisingly lengthy statement, allegedly from Paris Hilton, saying she would not appeal the judge's sentence and intended to serve the rest of her time in jail. Allegedly sent to the PR Newswire by Hilton's attorney, Richard Hutton, "on behalf of Paris Hilton," the statement went on to say she was "shocked" by the amount of attention her case was getting, and that she hoped the public and the media would "focus on more important things like the men and women serving our country in Iraq and other places around the world."

Paris Hilton's first public utterance from behind bars — and the News that she would not appeal her jail sentence — had apparently fallen in my lap. In the world of journalism, this was like getting a comment from Osama bin Laden in his lair.

Being a Journalist, my first move was to go to the TMZ website to see if they had reported the statement. They hadn't. My second move was to glance at the sign hanging in the Newsroom — get it first, but first get it right — for about a millisecond. It was possible that someone could have faked a statement and gotten PR Newswire to send it out, although 99.9 percent of what went out over the PR wire was legit. I also knew that the same press release had simultaneously gone to a lot of other News outlets, and that if I didn't get it on the wire immediately, someone else would get the scoop. By not taking the time to confirm the information, I was breaking a cardinal rule of Journalism, but this wasn't Journalism anymore.

I typed up a quick advisory saying Hilton would not appeal her jail sentence and transmitted it at 4:12 p.m. I summarized and quoted from her statement, but in my haste, I neglected to mention that it came from attorney Hutton via the PR Newswire, putting all the other News outlets in the same quandary I had been in seconds before. Without knowing whether the statement was bogus or where it came from, all they had to go on was the credibility of their source, which at the moment was City News Service, and more precisely, me.

Newspapers sometimes ran CNS bylines, but when TV or radio Newscasters used our stories, they'd usually say something like, "we're just learning that," or "this just in." About the only time they'd mention CNS was when they couldn't match the information through other sources but really wanted to report it, so they'd credit

CNS in case the information was wrong.

Well, within seconds of my transmitting the Paris Hilton advisory, the News radio stations started saying the name of my employer, and I could only imagine the havoc I was creating in TV Newsrooms across Southern California as they prepared for their evening newscasts. I needed to get a story on the wire that also included where I'd gotten the statement. But as I started to rush out a story, that sign in the office intruded upon my thoughts again and I decided to do what I should have done before transmitting the advisory, which was to try to confirm the statement was real.

I called the contact number on the press release, which was allegedly that of Hilton's attorney. It being late on a Saturday afternoon, I was surprised when a woman picked up the phone. I said I was calling for Richard Hutton. She said she could take a message for him. I said I needed to know if he had released a statement from Paris Hilton. She said Hutton would be making no further statements.

"Well, if you are saying he will make no further statements, are you saying he did issue this statement?" I stammered.

She said she was just the office person and wasn't authorized to make any statements about any statements. She hadn't denied he'd released the statement, and if she had confirmed the statement, she might still be pranking me. But by acting like a stuffy secretary, she had provided a non-confirmation confirmation. Good enough for me.

At 4:20 p.m. I transmitted a story:

LOS ANGELES (CNS) - Paris Hilton issued a statement this afternoon saying she has told her attorneys not to appeal Judge Michael Sauer's decision to return her to jail, and urged the media and public to focus on more important issues.

"I intend to serve my time at L.A. County Jail," she said in the statement, released by her attorney, Richard A. Hutton.

"Today, I told my attorneys not to appeal the judge's decision," she said. "While I greatly appreciate the sheriff's concern for my health and welfare, I intend to serve my time at L.A. County Jail."

"Being in jail is by far the hardest thing I have ever done," the statement continued. "During the past several days, I have had a lot of time to think and I believe that I am learning and growing from

this experience. I have also had time to read the mail from my fans. I very much appreciate all of their good wishes and hope they will keep their letters coming. Thank you as well to my family who has always stood by me. I love you and miss you so much!"

The heiress also expressed shock at the amount of attention her case had gotten.

"I must also say that I was shocked to see all of the attention devoted to the amount of time I would spend in jail for what I had done by the media, public and city officials," her statement concluded. "I would hope going forward that the public and the media will focus on more important things like the men and women serving our country in Iraq and other places around the world."

In the editor's note, I provided the attorney's phone number, so other journalists could joust with his secretary. But I still didn't reveal that I'd gotten Hilton's quotes from a press release that many of the other Media outlets had also received, only they had overlooked it, just as I had nearly done.

As soon as I filed the story I checked the TMZ website again. They still didn't have the story! It really was my scoop, and not just any scoop. On the biggest news story — not to be confused with News story — in the world on that particular day, I had been the first to get a quote from Paris Hilton behind bars. And when the 5 o'clock newscasts rolled around, guess what all the TV stations were "just learning."

Then the calls started coming in, from other Media outlets, wanting to know where the hell I'd gotten my information. And then I got the best call of all, from the Associated Press, which was in the interregnum between the Paris boycott and "Britney is a big deal." AP is the biggest wire service and arguably the best. The Marines of Journalism. AP is so big and CNS so small that it's not even a competition. In short, the AP would rather gargle with arsenic than call City News for help on a story.

But here was an AP staffer asking me where I'd gotten my information, and I knew he was hoping I'd gotten it first but gotten it wrong. Trying not to gloat, I casually told him the statement had come over the transom, on the PR Newswire, which was usually

pretty reliable. He asked me if I didn't think it was a bit odd that a statement from Paris Hilton would arrive on the PR wire. Twitter and Facebook were still in their infancy, and after thinking about it for a moment I said no, that it was actually a pretty logical way for Hilton's attorney to get out such a statement if the attorney didn't want to talk to the media. The AP staffer was still skeptical, so I told him about the secretary's non-confirmation confirmation and added that the story had been all over TV and radio and I'd gotten calls from other Media outlets, but no one had called to say the statement was bogus, and that until I got that call, I was sticking with my story.

At 7 p.m. I sent an updated story, this time crediting PR Newswire and adding in all the other Hilton news of the day, of which there happened to be a lot. Sharpton had done the talk show rounds, calling for equal medical treatment for everyone behind bars, and a local black activist said he thought that since the sheriff had said Paris was having mental problems, she should use her celebrity status to draw attention to the plight of the mentally ill and become a "poster girl for the mentally challenged."

I also recycled an ironic tidbit from the *Los Angeles Times* that turned into a weeklong series of revelations embarrassing to City Attorney Rocky Delgadillo. It seems Rocky's wife backed his city-owned SUV into a pole, and the city's insurance wouldn't cover the repairs because L.A. has some picky rules about how family members aren't supposed to use city-owned vehicles for personal business. Rocky, who in violation of state law didn't have car insurance, billed the city, i.e., the taxpayers, for the repairs (but reimbursed the taxpayers after the *Times* story came out).

The kicker is that his wife also had no insurance, so after the accident her driver's license was suspended. And just like Paris Hilton, she later got pulled over for driving on a suspended license and was treated like everyone else — which in her case meant she had to pay a $186 fine.

As I was about to send the Paris Hilton story to the wire, I did what I often did just before transmitting something to most of the major Media outlets in Southern California. I paused to reflect on how every typo, factual error and libelous adjective I may have slipped into that story was going to be magnified once I pushed the

button. And during that moment of reflection, I noticed that I hadn't made up a headline.

Headlines are kind of optional at a wire service, but for the bigger stories, you really should have a headline. I started to write, "Paris Hilton Issues Statement From Jail," but that was pretty lame, so I sharpened it to what she'd said from jail: "Paris Hilton Says She Won't Appeal Jail Sentence." But that didn't really cover what I thought was the essence of her statement and the part that resonated with me, which was that she thought everyone — the media, the public and public officials — ought to be focusing on something other than Paris Hilton. At a News wire service, you're not supposed to be flippant, but sometimes I couldn't help myself. And so I headlined the story, "Paris Hilton to World: Get a Life," and sent it to the wire. Sometimes you ride the bus and sometimes you drive the bus. All because I noticed a press release, suddenly I was not just on the Paris Hilton story but driving it. And my weekend on Paris was just beginning.

When my shift rolled around again at 4 p.m. Sunday, I discovered that the other editors had gotten behind on the Paris Hilton story, perhaps because they were more focused on News. First, the overnight editor thought inmates at the downtown jail's medical unit weren't allowed visitors, so he assumed Hilton wouldn't be getting any that day and said so in a story. The editor who replaced him didn't notice on TV or the TMZ website that Paris had talked to Barbara Walters and confirmed she would not appeal her sentence, or that she had been visited by her sister Nicky and sometime boyfriend Stavros Niarchos amid a paparazzi swarm and complaints from the families of other inmates that she was once again getting special treatment because her visitors got to cut to the front of the line because of the paps. In fact, City News hadn't put out any fresh Paris news since 4 a.m.

But I had some tricks up my sleeve. For some reason, the fact that Sharpton had said he wanted to meet with the sheriff to talk about equal treatment for inmates had stuck in my mind. The rev had huffed and he'd puffed, but so far, none of the Media seemed to have called the sheriff's department for a response. So I asked our police reporter to find out if a meeting had been set up between the sheriff

and the reverend to discuss Paris Hilton.

I started editing stories, and sometime later the printer clacked. I glanced down and it was a note from the reporter saying she'd called the sheriff's department and whoever answered the phone didn't know nothing about nothing. "God I hate this story," she'd added, but gamely added after that, "Any other phone numbers I might try?"

The reporter had better sources than I did, so I shrugged and returned to editing. But then it occurred to me that a couple days before, when the sheriff was on the defensive for having reassigned Paris to home confinement, he'd trotted out a spokesman, Steve Whitmore, who happened to be the son of actor James Whitmore. I looked up one of our earlier stories, and, son of a gun, there was an editor's note with his cell phone number.

"I feel your pain," I wrote in a return note to the reporter, along with the phone number, and again tried to edit the News stories that were starting to pile up. But not too long after that, the printer to my right clacked again, only this time it also started ringing, meaning the reporter had sent me an advisory, which usually meant breaking News — someone had been shot or something was on fire. Instead, it was a confirmation that Sheriff Baca would be meeting with the Rev. Sharpton. My jaw dropped. No way. I called the reporter and she said she'd talked to Whitmore, who'd said the meeting was on for the next afternoon.

I couldn't believe my luck. I raced out the advisory at 4:59 p.m., within seconds of the start of the 5 p.m. TV newscasts. One of the local TV stations had a computer monitor on the anchor desk where CNS advisories would pop up, so I tuned to that station, and sure enough, they were "just learning" about a meeting tomorrow between the sheriff and the reverend regarding you know who. The other stations caught up a half-hour later. I wasn't just back on the bus, I was back driving the bus.

It took me 45 minutes to get out a story, because in addition to adding in our scoop, I had to update our existing story with Paris' visitors and the Walters phone call and rehash her statement and all the other Paris news from the previous day. Again, you're not supposed to get flippant at a News service, but after recounting how Paris hoped the media and public would focus on more important

issues, I started the next paragraph with "Fat chance," and used that as a transition to report the latest TMZ and tabloid reports on how little she was eating and how much she was crying.

Turning back to the News, I checked the fax machine and email for anything new. Among the many emails was one purporting to be from a newly formed "group" that wanted to recall Sheriff Baca from office for treating Mel Gibson and Paris Hilton like they were celebrities. A similar email had been sent to CNS the day before, and I presume to many Media outlets. But no one had picked up on it, and neither had I, in my case because the email was anonymous, and there were no names on the group's website either. But there was a phone number, and after getting the second email I called it and left a message on an answering machine.

Probably just some gadfly, I thought. But what the heck. It wouldn't be the first time I'd allowed myself to be manipulated by a bit player with a gimmick. The website and email said a representative from the group would be downtown the next day to start gathering signatures for notice-to-recall petitions, and the site had gotten thousands of hits, so I redid the Paris Hilton story and stuck that in.

A short time later I got a call from a nervous-sounding man who nevertheless gave me his name and admitted to being the main if not sole member of the group, and further told me he was a former county worker and County Board candidate who currently worked as a store clerk. A quick check of Google confirmed my suspicions. There are a lot of fringe candidates in this world, but when they actually call you a fringe candidate in a Newspaper, you're not just a fringe candidate, you're a gadfly.

But that didn't stop me from refiling the story with the additional information, and the next time the TV news rolled around, they led with the recall effort, complete with pictures of the website. Suddenly the recall Baca effort had gained some visibility, if not traction, and I had sadly but wittingly added to the sheriff's headaches. It began to feel like piling on when I redid the story yet again, adding information from another email saying the head of Project Islamic HOPE wanted the county board to investigate the sheriff for not treating Paris like every other inmate, and that story got picked up by TV as well.

Shortly after 10 p.m. I got out my final Paris story. Once again, you're not supposed to be flippant at a wire service, but gee whiz, every other journalist, if not Journalist, had been cracking wise about the celebutante, so why not me, especially if I could combine news with News? And so I wrote, "Paris Hilton is safely behind bars, instead of in them, but she continues to make waves — for Sheriff Lee Baca."

My weekend on Paris was over, but I wasn't over Paris. Weeks later, I was glued to the TV for her midnight release from jail, which was broadcast live on local and cable news channels. When she emerged and "cat-walked," as the catty media described it, past the hysterical fans and paparazzi, and hugged her mom through a car window, I actually felt sorry for her. And when she was driven away with her mom and dad in a Cadillac Escalade with tinted windows, unescorted by police and pursued over freeways and surface streets by a rabid pack of paparazzi, with helicopters swirling above, showing yet another L.A. slow-speed chase, I felt sorry for her driver. The chase cars' drivers would box in the Escalade on all four sides and tap their brakes as photographers hung out the windows and flashed their cameras. Viewed from above by the helicopter's camera, their blinding flashbulbs looked like machine gun fire at pointblank range. It felt like the final ride of Princess Di.

Later, Paris appeared on CNN's *Larry King Live*. The media reported she couldn't summon up a favorite Bible passage and lied about her drug usage. If I were Paris, I'd have asked Larry what his favorite Bible passage was, and if I was 24 hours out of jail and still on probation, I'd have lied about taking drugs as well. She also declined to diss her BFFs or even the city attorney and judge, saying only that she thought she had been treated unfairly. She didn't cry once, even when King asked what it was like to be strip-searched. The media also carped that she seemed to stick to talking points, which was exactly what she was supposed to do.

Next, I watched as a son of Gloria Vanderbilt said he couldn't understand "this whole Paris thing." I'm not sure I understand this whole Paris thing either. But I keep thinking about those photographers chasing Paris down the freeway, taking picture after picture. If the windows of the Escalade were tinted, weren't the paparazzi's

pictures just dark reflections of themselves?