

Young, Fearless, and Foolish

You are smart, smart, smart—but you are not so smart!

—Yiddish proverb

I learned my first hard-won lesson about the world of journalism at age eighteen, a college freshman hell-bent on a writing career. I had offered to write a short feature for the UCLA Jewish student paper, *Ha'Am* (“the nation”), and was elated when the editor gave me the go-ahead.

I raced through the next edition of the paper to find my story. There it was—my first byline! I tingled with excitement. But as my eyes danced across the first lines of the article, I realized it had been almost completely rewritten. Why had the editor taken a hatchet to my maiden journalistic gem? In self-righteous pique, I barged into the newspaper’s office and lashed out at the editor. If my article had been so bad, why didn’t she give me a chance to make it right, or at least remove my name from a story that was no longer mine?

The editor defended herself, pointing out my total inexperience in journalism as well as her need to get the paper to the printer quickly. When I harrumphed that I would never write for her again, it’s a wonder she didn’t jump out of her seat and shout, “Thank God!”

Growing up, I had been generously praised by my parents, grandparents, and teachers for my facility with language. Believing my own good press gave me an extravagant sense of my own abilities. This was my first reality check about my writing and one of many crucial lessons that would serve to humble me along my road to

becoming the best writer I could be.

From early childhood, books were magical wonderlands. When I was five, I lay in bed with rapt attention as my father read to me from *The Wizard of Oz*, though to my consternation he frequently fell asleep in the middle of the chapter. When I was seven, I was absorbed by *The Five Little Peppers and How They Grew*, *Charlotte's Web*, and other classics. My insatiable appetite to absorb the written word wasn't always beneficial. In the late 1960s, I read both *Time* and *Newsweek*, filling my mind with nerve-racking knowledge about war, violent protests, drug overdoses, and assassinations. This was a heavy psychological load that made my world feel scary and unstable.

Still, there was no help from my reading addiction. I excelled in all my English classes as emphatically as I flailed in every math and science class. With these lopsided abilities, I banked on my language skills to propel me forward into a writing career. Despite my first journalistic flop, in the spring of my sophomore year I won a summer journalism internship in New York with the Jewish Student Press Service. Only one intern was chosen each summer, and my stories would get picked up by subscribing Jewish newspapers across the country.

Journalism skills were only part of my fabulous education that summer. I was no urban sophisticate, having grown up in Van Nuys, one of several sleepy suburbs in the San Fernando Valley. In Manhattan I felt like a hick, and in the heat of the summer, a sticky one at that. I had heard about this barometric condition called "humidity" that existed in New York. But as a native Angeleno, I'd only read about it in books or seen actors sweating from it in movies. Walking the steamy streets in July and August and descending into the clammy, smelly subway platforms below, I learned the meaning of the word. The air conditioning on the F train I took each day from Brooklyn to Manhattan only seemed to work a few days a week. Grasping the metal ring that hung from the ceiling of the subway car, I tried not to fall directly into the malodorous armpit of the man holding onto the ring next to me as we hurtled forward together.

My light, cool cotton shirts from the Indian boutiques in lower Manhattan were all getting ruined from sweat.

In addition to learning to survive the heat and sweat of subway rides, I also learned first-hand about three-card monte. Walking up Lexington one afternoon, I stopped to watch young toughs in jeans and T-shirts holding court on their “desks” of overturned boxes. My eyes popped open wide watching a customer guess the right playing card, magically turning his twenty-dollar bill into two twenties. It looked so easy! I had never seen any game like this before. As a student hard up for cash and earning a pittance for my internship, before I knew it I was handing over one twenty, then two, both of which were stuffed into the jeans pocket of one of the young sharks after I guessed the wrong card.

My sudden loss of forty dollars cut deeply—it was food money for the better part of a week. I had fallen for the con, and I was angry at myself for being a rube, but I was angrier still at the duplicitous duo plying their trade. They wore hard expressions, but I brazenly sidled next to one of them and murmured that I would not leave until he gave me my money back.

He ignored me. I didn’t move. He pocketed another hundred bucks or so from other dupes and then I repeated my demand. Wouldn’t he be glad to get rid of me for the bargain price of forty dollars?

“If you don’t give me back my money, I’m calling the police,” I said *sotto voce*. I was drawing attention from a few bystanders, some of them with alarmed expressions, cueing me that I was probably out of my mind to be testing guys like this. The “proprietor” raised his voice and said, “Lady, you call the police and we both go to jail, because you just gambled and gambling’s illegal in New Yawk!”

Who knew? Not me!

My student poverty and outrage overrode my common sense. “I’m not leaving till I get my money,” I repeated. No sooner had the words left my mouth than panic flooded my body. I had gone past the tipping point. Was I actually risking my life for forty bucks?

Apparently, yes! Suddenly, he reached into his pocket and slammed two crumpled twenty-dollar bills into my hand. “Get *outta heah*,” he growled.

I bolted up the avenue. My heart pounded so hard that I put my hand over my heart to try to keep that vital organ from leaping out and in search of a saner home. I hid out in various stores, unable to calm down. I stole glances to see if anyone was coming after me. A half hour later, burrowing in a basement-level bookstore, I felt calmer. What could be safer than a bookstore? Maybe they’d let me stay the night, and I’d clutch a copy of *Pride and Prejudice*, dreaming of Pemberley. Just as I considered the ordeal truly over and my breathing rate had returned to normal, a very tall, extremely muscular man approached me and said, “Hey, that was you playing three-card monte down the street, wasn’t it?”

Had he been following me? If so, how had I missed such a hulking presence? His sudden appearance and question terrified me so much I thought I would collapse on the spot.

“Yes . . .” I managed to whisper.

“You oughta be careful out there,” he cautioned, shaking his head in disapproval. “Those guys were watching you. Don’t ever do that again.”

“I won’t, I promise. I won’t ever play any card game anywhere in the Tri-State area, or even in the known universe,” I vowed, trembling. He left, and I stayed in the Classics aisle until closing time. On the way to the subway, I found a pay phone to call my housemates in Brooklyn, native New Yorkers who were renting me a room. They expressed shock at my antics and warned me to watch my back as I made my way underground to the train.

A few weeks later I found myself lost in the Bowery at dusk. I had made plans to have dinner with Ben, a good friend and fellow English major from UCLA. He gave me directions to his loft apartment involving a train, a bus, and then a brief walk. The bus trundled through neighborhoods that were getting sketchier and grimmer and with a higher per capita ratio of drunks with every block. I clearly had

missed the stop and nervously exited the bus in a neighborhood with few people capable of standing upright or seeming to be sentient, so I sought help in a tiny bodega.

Five tough-looking guys faced me from behind and in front of the small counter. Forbidding musculature was on display through their tight T-shirts. I was young, female, and alone. My sense of vulnerability to attack was fully engaged, honed by thousands of years of persecution against Jews and by New York's high crime rate. Frequent headlines in the tabloids splashed photos of the latest victims of criminal assaults, many of them young women. I began to understand why New York was called the city that never sleeps. With dangerous villains lurking all around, who could sleep?

I stood stock still, paralyzed with a level of terror that made my fear after escaping from three-card monte seem like bush league. My mind went blank. I could not utter a single syllable as I stared at the guys, and they stared right back. I couldn't remember my friend's name. (It was Ben.) I couldn't remember the name of his street. (It was Houston.) I couldn't even remember my own name. (It was Judy.) I thought of my parents, who loved me so much and who might never see me again.

While most of my brain synapses were misfiring, I did register the fact that none of these young men with powerful muscles had made any move to violate any part of my person. This was cheering. Finally, one of the guys asked, "Whaddaya want?"

I stammered and stuttered, my entire body quaking. In a barely audible voice I asked how to get to the address on Houston Street. I saw pity in their eyes. One of them walked me outside and in his heavily accented English directed me where to turn left, then right, to find my friend's apartment.

They weren't going to kill me! I would see my parents again! I still had a future in journalism! Frankly, I hadn't learned much journalism yet, but I was becoming street savvy by the moment. "Thank you! Thank you!" I groveled, after being given directions.

As I focused on following the directions, I realized that I had an uncanny knack for making people very happy by just agreeing to go away: the editor of the UCLA Jewish student paper. The three-card monte dealer. The guys in the bodega. Perhaps this was something I needed to work on.

An hour late, I rode up the old, creaky elevator in the converted warehouse to Ben's fourth-floor loft, falling into his arms and blabbering dramatically about my near miss with becoming another crime statistic in New York. After dinner Ben seemed glad to get rid of me, too.

I learned that surviving in New York required rules. Rule one: no card games on the street, especially when the playing field is an upside-down cardboard box. Rule two: make sure you have explicit directions when seeking an unfamiliar address. Rule three: choose a theme song to sing during scary moments. That summer, I chose the Bee Gees' "Stayin' Alive."

Still, New York was a fabulous place to spend my summer. I chomped on the biggest, chewiest bagels my teeth had ever met and the likes of which had not yet traveled as far west as Los Angeles. I discovered Entenmann's cakes and donuts, similarly foreign, tantalizing, and addicting. Most crucially, I began to earn my chops as a reporter. My editor, Eli, sent me all over the city to interview Jews who were innovators in the world of arts, culture, and religion. Following two opposing trends, I covered both the emergence of gay synagogues on one hand and the rising trend of nonreligious Jews becoming Orthodox on the other, interviewing participants in both movements. I loved asking people questions that would otherwise have been none of my business. My interest was genuine, which earned trust, so interviewees talked openly about their experiences, innovations, and perspectives. At the time I wasn't shopping for a deeper religious experience or affiliation. I did not observe Shabbat, but I also did not eat nonkosher meat. Judaism was my identity, emotionally and culturally.

I was elated to see my stories getting published in subscribing newspapers in many states, but that ego boost was tempered by realizing how much I had to learn about good feature writing. When Eli sat me down to review his edits on the first story I turned in, my heart sank as I saw my copy hemorrhaging red ink. My face must have registered the shock because Eli said, “Look, Judy. If you want to be a professional writer, you can never be jealous of your own words.”

I got the message. My words were hardly sacred, and in many cases they may not even have been appropriate, specific, or well-chosen. More than almost anything else in the world, I wanted to be an outstanding writer, and Eli was an outstanding teacher. He was an accomplished, smart editor, toiling in a low-paying field for the greater good of helping to train future journalists in Jewish media. Whatever Eli told me to do, I would do.

He patiently showed me my mistakes. Passive voice. Mixed tenses. Places where I should have asked a follow-up question but didn't. Places where I had written too much. Or too little. I saw and understood. I would staunch the flow of red ink on my next assignments. I would show him that I could write.