

ONE

I SEEK REFUGE, AT THE MALL

It was time for a change. A big one.

A freelance writer with an unsteady and insecure income, despite years writing for markets like *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *Glamour*, I was weary of chasing checks and haggling over payment. The industry, which hasn't raised its rates in thirty years because so many people are so eager to write, often without payment, had lost its allure.

I needed a new challenge.

After years of working at home alone, I was also lonely and isolated in a suburban New York apartment, without the distraction of kids or a pet, staring north up the Hudson River at the not-terribly-reassuring steam rising from a nuclear power plant.

I lived with my fiancé, Jose, a fellow career journalist, and had shared a life and home with him since 2001; his official moving day, when the trucks were loaded with his belongings to bring them from Brooklyn to my town, had been 9/11. We were both hardheaded world travelers, devotees of French bistros, news junkies. We met when I was reporting a

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magazine story on online dating and he replied to one of the listings I had placed for the assignment.

In 2007, I earned barely \$20,000, less than a third of my best year's income. I wasn't earning enough because I'd begun to hate journalism. Not the writing; not the interviewing; not meeting and talking to everyone from convicted felons to Queen Elizabeth—I loved all of those aspects of journalism. I never tired of unpacking people's dreams and demons, no matter who they were, and translating them into stories. But, after more than a decade of freelancing, I was fed up with the growing gap between its putative freedom and the constant hustle.

And while I loved watching red-tailed hawks soar past my windows and rainstorms sliding across the river like a scrim, I just couldn't face another year of all-day solitude. I wanted to try something new, but craved (did this exist?) something simple and steady. Something that would pay me promptly and regularly. I needed gas and grocery money; my writing would cover, as it usually had for years, the big-ticket items like the mortgage and my retirement savings.

I needed a part-time job.

What I really needed most was a physical place outside my home where a boss and coworkers and a company would once more count on me. People might get to know me and like me, ask how my weekend went. We'd have in-jokes and a shared history.

But doing what?

I didn't want to pump gas or be a telemarketer or stock grocery shelves or slice meat in a deli or be a home health-care worker. I'd avoided learning marketable and lucrative skills like HTML, Photoshop, or Excel because I wanted work away from a computer. I didn't want to be a waitress again or a busboy. I'd done both as a college sophomore. I also rejected dog-walking, babysitting, and tutoring. Too much teenage competition.

I was starved for lively conversation, lots of laughter, and authority over something beyond my living room sofa.

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Reading my local paper, I saw in September 2007 a help wanted ad for The North Face, a national chain of high-end outdoor wear. The company was opening a new store in an upscale mall nearby, filled with high-end names like Versace, Tiffany, and Neiman Marcus, in an affluent county near New York City.

I had traveled to thirty-seven countries, spoke fluent French and good Spanish, and participated in many sports, from ice-skating to squash. I loved sharing my passions for adventurous travel and the outdoors with others. It seemed like a good fit.

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I'd been a journalist since my freshman year of college. It was all I'd ever wanted to be, and I'd gone on to work as a staff reporter and feature writer for three major dailies. I never had kids and never wanted them. My dream was to become a foreign correspondent filing features from Abidjan or Lima. My work had always given me more than a paycheck, offering adventures I never could have otherwise enjoyed, like flying through the middle of an iceberg on my way home from reporting a story in an Arctic village for the *Montreal Gazette*. A French truck driver ten years my senior took me on an eight-day journey from Perpignan to Istanbul. At twenty-three, I performed as an extra in the ballet *Sleeping Beauty* at Lincoln Center, sharing the stage with Rudolf Nureyev. I sipped a gin and tonic aboard the royal yacht *Britannia*, where I met Queen Elizabeth. I even spent five days aboard an Australian tall ship, scrambling a hundred feet up the rigging several times a day and sleeping in a tiny, swaying hammock every night.

It had been a year since I'd lost my job as a reporter and feature writer for the *New York Daily News*, the nation's sixth-largest newspaper. In July 2006, I was sliced out of my career with surgical speed at three p.m. on a Wednesday afternoon.

Colleagues had warned me that the only time I'd speak with Peter

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McGillivray, a decades-entrenched senior manager at the *Daily News*, would be the day he fired me. It would, as it did, come in the form of an e-mail summons.

And there it was.

I walked into his dim, cramped office. Joe Campanelli, one of the men who had hired me, was reclining on the sofa, staring with disdain. My direct boss, Bill Harrison, was absent, struggling with a serious and ultimately fatal illness.

McGillivray, a pale, doughy guy who looked—like all senior managers there—like an outtake from the 1950s—leaned forward, his comb-over in place, a Kleenex box positioned nearby.

“We have to let you go,” he said lugubriously.

I laughed. “Why?”

“Because you’re not productive.”

“You’re kidding, right? Compared to who?”

In eleven months, I’d produced more than sixty stories; several were national scoops. Only two weeks earlier, I’d had “the wood,” the paper’s entire front page—a huge win every reporter competed for—with an exclusive piece about former New Jersey governor Jim McGreevey.

My tenure at the paper, my first-ever experience working full-time for a Manhattan daily or a tabloid, had been embattled from the start; I’d been hired by the paper’s top editor, whom no one liked and who left within ten months. As someone who had freelanced for *The New York Times* since 1990, a bare-knuckled tabloid was a lousy fit for me, and my stories sat unused week after week while, frustrated, I watched the *Times*, *Time*, and *60 Minutes* jump on the same ideas sometimes long after mine were written and ready to go. But no *Daily News* editor would publish them.

I needed the income. Few people have the confidence or savings or a new job waiting to just walk out. I’d stayed and sucked it up.

That summer afternoon, I quietly said good-bye to half a dozen colleagues—several of whom appeared shocked and sad to see me

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go—and walked down the *News's* long, narrow entrance hallway lined with enormous, iconic front pages of assassinations, executions, and elections. I would deeply miss being part of a major newspaper, scrambling all over the five boroughs on stories. I'd miss a few funny and kind colleagues.

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I had no luck finding another job in journalism, at least one that paid more than I could make at home in sweatpants. I really missed being part of something—the excitement, the visibility, being relied upon, and knowing, and having other professionals appreciate, that I had something special to offer.

And it was increasingly difficult to watch my friends and fiancé—a photo editor for *The New York Times*—enjoy their work and be handsomely rewarded for it. I withdrew from my peers, my growing envy poisoning our few brief conversations.

At fifty, I was desperate to learn something new and, perhaps, become really good at it, while loath to assume graduate school debt to change careers without a clear direction.

Retail, like journalism, would push me into meeting dozens of strangers, something I knew how to do, liked, and was very good at. It would also offer, far from my own field, a clean slate and a risk-free fresh start. After my debacle at the *Daily News*, my self-confidence still battered, I needed a win. Few people I knew were likely to find me in a suburban mall store on a Tuesday afternoon. If I hated it, I could always just quit. It would never go on my résumé, and my odd little downscale pursuit would remain a secret shared only with close friends.

Still, taking an hourly retail job at the age of fifty, even if only for two days a week (which I quickly scaled back to one), felt like a giant and frightening step backward, the beginning of an inevitable slide down the socioeconomic ladder into the working class after decades of an upward climb in a profession I loved. I grew up attending private schools and

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summer camps, with a grandmother who went everywhere in a limousine, a father who won international awards for his documentary films, and a journalist mother whose glossy black mink had an emerald-green silk lining. My two younger half-brothers were doing well, one in policy work, the other running his own software company.

I charge \$150 an hour for my writing and editorial skills—but knew I'd be lucky to get one-tenth of that in retail, a low-status job that most students were happy to leave after college. Was it even worth it?

Friends were supportive, if somewhat dubious. Why would I want to trade the comfort of working from home for an exhausting job on my feet all day? Wouldn't it be rough on my ego after seeing my by-lines in national magazines? Those who knew my short temper wondered if I'd even last a week.

And I'd spent very little time in sprawling suburban malls like the one that became my new workplace.

They represented everything I loathe: mass marketing, shoppers-as-sheep being herded efficiently from one overpriced stall to the next. Bad food, ugly carpeting, banal architecture, nasty music, TVs blaring ads overhead as you drag yourself with increasing weariness and dehydration up one side and down another, with only empty calories like oversized pretzels for mid-shopping sustenance. The national chains that populated malls seemed uncreative and soulless to me. Logos and brands left me cold.

And I had no retail experience. The last time I'd worked behind a counter was for a few months when I was seventeen in a Toronto drugstore, mostly blowing my tiny paycheck on the candy bars that lay within arm's reach. In the end, I figured if I could get jaded national magazine editors to buy my stories, surely I had *some* ability to sell things. I did know how to sell my own ideas to strangers and had been doing so since college.

Interviews for the new North Face store, like a hoofers' audition, were held at a local hotel, no appointment necessary. Accustomed only

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to more formal interviews in my field, I wasn't sure what to wear, and chose a simple Eileen Fisher black silk dress and plain black leather flats. I created a one-page résumé listing some of the skills I hoped might prove transferable, from worldwide travel and sports to cross-cultural fellowships. I admitted up-front, both verbally and in writing, that I had no retail experience.

The interview room was long and narrow, with rows of chairs mostly empty and two desks at the front occupied by two athletic-looking young men, one at each desk. Only three job-seekers were present when I arrived—a man in his fifties, maybe older, wearing a suit; a slim, curvaceous girl in her twenties, virtually poured into her orange jersey shirt-dress; and a sour-looking woman in her late fifties, maybe early sixties.

I was surprised to see so few applicants: the company was well known, its products widely counterfeited, and (in comparison to most newsrooms, which were crowded, cluttered, noisy bullpens) the mall was at least a clean, safe, dry, and warm work environment. Did no one want these jobs? Had everyone already come and gone? Was the money really that bad?

I could easily eavesdrop on the other three candidates, their interviews loud enough to be heard from the back of the room. The young girl yammered on for about twenty minutes, her ponytail bobbing and swinging, pouring on the charm.

The older man apologized for his thirty-year-old suit. Not a good sign. The older woman leaned on the interviewer's desk, and his eyes widened. She seemed stiff and angry, pushing hard for a job she maybe didn't really want but desperately needed.

"What do you think you can offer the company?" the interviewer finally asked, mildly. It was clear she had no satisfactory answer.

My turn.

It didn't feel like a job interview, but a long and congenial conversation. I was now alone in the room, no one else waiting impatiently behind me. The two managers, Joe Fields and Mike Knelman, were easygoing,

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smart, funny, relaxed white guys, who appeared to be in their thirties. We all talked for about half an hour. I liked them immediately and sensed they liked me. They didn't grill me or ask trick questions or demand I complete some stale personality test.

We just . . . talked.

Joe, with forearms as thick and powerful as thighs, had close-cropped graying hair, eyes the turquoise of a glacial lake, and a multicolored swirling tattoo running from his right wrist—encircled with a bone bead bracelet strung on leather—to his elbow. I'd never even met, let alone needed to impress, someone so inked. He didn't seem like some alienated punk, though. His manner was low-key, that of someone clearly comfortable with wielding authority, at ease in his own skin.

This laid-back, confident style was so unfamiliar that it was disorienting. I really liked it.

Almost every journalism job interview I'd had had been a sort of psychic dodgeball game, as I tried to guess, in the face of tough questions lobbed thick and fast, what they might find engaging, impressive, witty. I knew I could write but was terrible at selling myself. I had begun to dread, even avoid, job interviews as a result.

Joe and Mike were friendly and respectful. They didn't, as seemed to happen in every journalism interview, sneer at my work, laugh at my credentials, or dismiss decades of accomplishment. In their world, I'd actually done nothing—which somehow was just fine with them. (I later discovered this is pretty standard in retail, where many newcomers lack experience and are quickly brought up to speed.) Even clearly exhausted after a long day of interviews, the two didn't behave as though meeting me were an imposition, but seemed genuinely interested in what I might bring to the job.

The money, of course, was sobering, stunningly low. It was less than I had earned as a teenage lifeguard in the 1970s—\$9 an hour for part-timers, \$11 for full-time, with no commission or bonus, but with a healthy discount on company products. And I would have to pay \$8 just to park in the mall's lot for my shift—in effect losing the first hour of my labor.

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I asked for \$11 an hour, working two days a week, Tuesdays from one to nine p.m. and Wednesdays during the day. That would still leave me three and a half days a week, if I didn't work weekends, for writing and editing assignments. I was a little nervous about giving up even a few hours of that time, but I'd really reached the end of my rope focusing all of my energy on one set of skills.

I walked out into the September sunshine. I had sent out forty-eight résumés applying for nonprofit communications or writing positions, a segue that many of my colleagues had repeatedly and enthusiastically assured me was a natural transition. I hadn't received a single reply.

Now, finally, I could feel it. I was about to be offered a job. I didn't care if it was retail. They liked me. They wanted me.

I was hired.