

Just the Facts

A novel

Ellen Sherman



SHE WRITES PRESS

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In honor of my mother, Carol Sherman
and for Chris, forever

What a curiosity it was to hold a pen—nothing but a small pointed stick, after all, oozing its hieroglyphic puddles... An immersion into the living language: all at once this cleanliness, this capacity, this power to make a history, to tell, to explain. To retrieve, to reprove!
To lie.

Cynthia Ozick, *The Shawl*

Chapter One

Fall Forward

Bandits Rob Bar

Two masked bandits, armed with a shotgun and a rifle, allegedly held up a Crownsville tavern Sunday night, locked the patrons and employees in the men's room, and made off with \$63.27 from the cash register, county police said.

South Falls, Md., Sept. 1978—I considered myself more fortunate than others. But when the kitchen phone rang at six a.m., I sensed everything was about to change. My stomach tightened as I ran downstairs and grabbed it, knowing it could only be for me.

“Slanecrash—need night way,” was what I heard.

“Little Bill? What?”

“A small plane crashed at BWI! You need to get there right away! A photographer will meet you!” It was definitely my assistant editor, using way too many exclamation points.

I nodded, shivering in my underwear and T-shirt. I'd been fast asleep. My two housemates would still be sleeping; they slept like lumberjacks. Were lumberjacks heavy sleepers?

“Nora? Still there?”

“Yeah, sorry. Say it one more time?”

Now he spoke in ridiculous fashion, pausing after each word.

“Okay. I’m off,” I said, rubbing my eyes. No doubt Little Bill had picked me for this assignment because I lived the closest to Baltimore-Washington International Airport, and had driven there to interview the newly crowned Miss America the week before, on my second day at the paper. She had been en route to the Dominican Republic to help out at a school for severely handicapped children, and had been delightful to interview, so enthusiastic it seemed like she was still competing. But this. Talk about throwing me right in there.

A press officer greeted the reporters as we arrived, corralling us into a small room as cold as a meat locker. “You will not be permitted to view the wreckage,” he said, and inwardly I said “Amen,” even though I knew this was the wrong response.

I jotted down his answers while the others asked questions.

It is not immediately clear what caused the crash, which occurred shortly after five a.m. The family is not available for comment.

Thank G-d, I mumbled.

There was an eyewitness: *A man driving to the airport saw the plane spiraling down. He ran into the adjacent woods to try to help and saw the remains of the pilot slumped inside the cockpit.* The press officer looked up, scanned the faces of the reporters and cameramen. *The plane was badly damaged,* he added, daring us to imagine what condition the pilot’s body was in. Goose bumps broke out on my arms—again.

A fire at the crash scene was extinguished.

Even though the aircraft was a two-seater, for us this was a big-gish story, so a freelance photographer named Stu had been sent to join me. He was able to go as far as the cordoned area at the base of the woods, reporting back that he had shot some photos of the “crumpled” plane, although probably from too great a distance. He gave me the roll of film, saying “Take that directly to *The Courier*. You’ll write the story there.”

The Annapolis Evening Courier was our sister paper, the daily. I worked at the semi-weekly, but important stories appeared in both. This would be my first in the big paper, a fact that intensified my nerves.

To me, Stu seemed blank and dispassionate, but then I noticed the tension in his eyes. “The air is still wriggly—you know, the way it gets

above a barbeque. And it smelled really funky out there, something I can't describe," he said. "Don't take too long to finish up here," he added as he left.

I hoped I was finished now. I walked out of the press room feeling several things at once: relief that all I'd had to do was listen, that I didn't have to ask any hard questions or see the wreckage; but also ashamed—I was still such a baby.

My father used to yell at me when I ran out of the room during the violent parts of movies. "It's only a movie," he would say, but for me everything was real. What got me most was not so much the blood and gore, but rather the pain and horror on people's faces, the intolerable suffering.

So here, at the perimeter of disaster, I was grateful to be limited to a perfunctory job. I ran toward my car, but just before reaching it, stopped, out of breath, something compelling me to turn and survey the empty runway which gave away nothing about what had transpired so close by. A maintenance man wearing a fluorescent orange vest stood beside a row of small planes. I headed over to ask if he had seen anything.

Jeff Grissom, mechanic and airport employee, said he was standing on Runway 7 a few minutes after five when he 'saw that poor little plane plummet after its second attempt to land.' He removed his cap, held it to his chest. 'It was absolutely awful,' he said. 'Took my breath away.'

Cool-ish morning, end of September. The fog, ever-present in the early mornings and after sunset in this county that bordered the Chesapeake, finally dissipated as I made my way to *The Courier's* offices. Another beautiful day, belying a million tragedies.

The Courier was a majestic facility compared to *The Anne Arundel Record*, my paper. The newsroom was bustling. Roger, the managing editor, told me to use the desk of someone named McCord, gently seating me in McCord's swivel chair. Roger was younger and hipper than my editor, Big Bill. I had met him on my job-search trip. In fact, it was Roger who had directed me to *The Record*, suggesting I get my feet wet there before attempting to work at a daily.

I started to type and the story poured out.

A small, single-engine Cessna plane spiraled out of the foggy sky and crashed in the heavily wooded area not far from Runway 7 at Baltimore-Washington International Airport (BWI) early this morning, according to James Larson, airport spokesman.

The pilot, John Baldwin, 31, of Arnold, MD, was pronounced dead at the scene, as was his passenger, Mindy Baldwin, 29, the pilot's sister. Ms. Baldwin also resided in Arnold.

Eyewitness's account, Jeff Grissom's account...

As I finished writing, I was flooded with sadness and disturbing thoughts. A brother and sister, two years apart, same as my brother and me. My mother used to call us, Jake and me, the Bickersons. "You can't stand to be together, but you can't stand to be apart," she liked to say.

I missed Jake a lot, and I also was reminded of how much our dad loved planes. He had once told me that, if he could do his life over again, he would become a pilot. He had been so disappointed not to serve in the military in "War Two" (as he called it)—exempt for various reasons, not the least of which was that he needed to support his mother and three younger sisters.

"All done?" A handsome guy with unruly black hair startled me out of my reverie. He was standing, arms folded, leaning against the top of McCord's cubicle.

"Mr. McCord, I presume?"

He shook his head no.

"I'm not quite done. I want to check it one more time. This is my debut in the daily." I knew the story would run on the front page, top of the fold.

"Connor Hannah," the guy said, extending his hand. "I've been reading your stuff. Not bad for a rookie. How's Old Bill treating you?"

"Fine. He's pretty nice."

"You think so?"

I smiled. Almost all of *The Courier* reporters began at *The Record*. It was like a minor-league feeder team. Connor Hannah looked to be in his mid-thirties, making him one of the oldest on the reportorial

staff. I read *The Courier* religiously, especially his stuff, and he was hands-down the best in my opinion, an excellent news reporter who also wrote humorous features.

I loved his lyrical name, so symmetrical with all those “o’s,” “n’s,” “a’s,” and “h’s.” He wrote with a lilt, too, like he grew up gallivanting in a glen. *The Courier* had just finished running a series describing his participation in a class filled with hilarious, if somewhat improbable, characters learning to line jump from a plane. On the day of the big event, he had broken his wrist upon landing.

No matter, I am on the ground, and almost in one piece. My fellow jumpers take a long time getting up, but at a glance, they also seem mostly whole. We stand together, as grateful to be alive as patients coming out of anesthesia—Carlos holding his head, Kathleen her hip, and I my wrist, which certainly is no longer properly aligned. Then Captain Kyle asks, and we all nod our heads “Sure.” We’d like to do it again.

I had been wondering what he looked like. He had a swarthy complexion and a constellation of dark beauty marks on his face, which I found very appealing, particularly this one dot at the lower corner of his left eye.

“Hey, how’s your wrist?” I asked. “That was a great series.”

“Not too bad now. I broke my radius bone. It’s almost healed.” He unbuttoned his shirt cuff to reveal a wrist and forearm wrapped in gauze.

“Whoa—that’s a lot of tape!”

“It only hurts when I type,” he said. Another guy with a winning smile.

When I finished, Roger told me to wait while he read over my article, right in front of me. “Great. Thanks for your help,” he said.

I strutted over to Connor’s desk to say goodbye. He didn’t hear me approach, intent on making sense out of chaos, these little slips of paper with scribbles on them, which were everywhere. I tapped his shoulder and he swung around.

We stared at each other for a bit.

“Oh, so long, Plowright,” he said with a wink. “Keep knocking ‘em dead with the obits!”

Oy, I thought, but I lingered a few seconds longer, hoping he’d ask for my number. Well, at least he knew where to find me.

In the middle of the month, I had moved to Maryland with one suitcase, an electric typewriter, and a large cardboard box filled with typing paper, legal pads, Wite-Out, and a bundle of pens I had taken from my dad’s store. Down the side, they read: “Plowright. Plow far.”

My father had been inspired by the words of Thomas Carlyle: “Go as far as you can see; when you get there you’ll be able to see farther.” He was the most practical person I’d ever known, my father, having lived a life bound by commitments and responsibilities. Yet on my behalf he was a dreamer, urging me to “Reach for the stars.” He’d had my mom embroider that on a throw pillow for me when I left for college, thankfully without the transistor-radio logo for Plowright Electronics.

It was a tall order.

When he had started his business, before I was born, my father changed his name from Plutz to Plowright, a good move. I thought my name, Nora, suggested someone who strove for change, like Nora in *A Doll’s House*; or perhaps someone acerbically assertive, *a la* Nora Charles in *The Thin Man*. At the least, Nora Anne Plowright sounded credible, someone who wanted to try hard, be a good person, do the right thing. Someone who could look you in the eye. Someone destined to make something out of her life?

At the last minute, my mom persuaded me to take the pillows, blanket, linens, desk blotter, and a few lamps from my childhood bedroom. This was disconcerting; hopefully, I could still come home to visit. My dad presented me with the keys to a used 1971 Chevrolet Caprice, my college graduation present. We were in the middle of a gas crisis and this bruiser of a used car was humming when it got ten miles per gallon, but obviously fuel efficiency was not my dad’s chief concern. He wanted me to be safe, and felt I was better off traveling by boat.

Initially, I stayed at a Holiday Inn about ten minutes from the newspaper's offices, and on my first day of work I loitered at a Dunkin' Donuts, reading *The New York Times* and *The Record*, drinking my first cup of coffee ever ("black" for this hard-bitten reporter) and demolishing two vanilla kreme donuts (the "k" guaranteeing they were 100 percent ersatz). I skimmed through the papers with this refrain in my head: "What have I done? What have I done? I don't know how to be a reporter. I'm afraid"—to the tune of a camp color-war song. Then I looked at my watch. I was about to be late.

The *Record's* staff was small. There was the editor-in-chief, Mr. Gilhooley, who went by Big Bill; the assistant editor, Little Bill, about five-four, early thirties, who was also a prolific general assignment reporter; and the people in their twenties: Catherine, news reporter; Tim, sports reporter; and now me, an insecure news reporter because when it came down to it, I wasn't sure I could jump into the fray. I was afraid it would be like when I played field hockey in high school: I was fast and always near the ball, but couldn't quite bring myself to jab my stick in there, to really mix it up, and possibly get badly bruised.

"What makes you qualified to be a newspaper reporter?" Big Bill had asked when he interviewed me.

"I think I have a nose for news," I said, inching forward in my chair like I was telling him a secret, hoping to appear earnest. You *could* make these things up. "Also, I'm really good with people, which is conducive to getting them to talk to me, open up to me."

Me, me, me....

Bill Gilhooley, venerable editor-in-chief of *The Anne Arundel Record* (America's oldest newspaper, as it happened), raised his salty gray, bushy eyebrows and couldn't have looked more skeptical. My relevant experience was paltry; I had written for my high school sports page and a few articles for my college paper. He glanced at the clips I'd provided: "Bulldogs Outlast Warriors," "School Prez Encourages Interface with Community."

"Why do you want to work at a paper?" he asked, his eyes now riveted on a mound of chewing gum clotted with debris on the sole of his worn Top-Sider.

“Well, I’ve always loved to write, and I think I’m pretty good at it. One day I’d like to be a novelist, but I’m twenty-two—I need some experience. Hell, I need a lot of experience, and I also need to support myself, not to mention get out of my parents’ house.”

Shouldn’t have said “hell” obviously. I smiled sweetly.

He examined my resume again. “My son just moved to New Jersey. Verona. That’s near your hometown, right?”

“Right next door!”

“Love those Tudor houses,” Big Bill said, all sunshine and light now.

Little Bill was from “the deep South,” while Catherine hailed from Iowa. Big Bill and Tim actually grew up in Severna Park, where the paper was based. All any of them had ever wanted was to work on a newspaper.

After the intros that first day, Big Bill had called me into his small office—the rest of us shared one large newsroom. He had typed out directions to the police department and said I was to get there at eight on the dot every morning to go through the reports and select items for the police blotter. I was thinking that his thick, graying hair and a few days’ worth of stubble made him look like a ship’s captain.

“The funeral homes send us releases and you need to write these up every day, too,” Big Bill said. “These are two good places to start.” He handed me a stack of back issues by way of example, and three funeral-home notices to work on right away. I was astonished that he wanted me to just dive in like that, that I wouldn’t be trailing one of the reporters for a week or so. Welcome to the Show.

“Also, I’ll give you some leads at the beginning, but as you get acquainted with the different towns in our catchment area, we’ll expect you to start generating stories on your own,” my editor continued.

“Catchment” was a new one to me, and I wasn’t crazy about that other word: expect.

Now, my ninth day on the job, I had covered headline news. And the day had barely begun. Eight thirty! I needed to do the police blotter.

With its large reception desk in the entrance hall, long lines of lockers, and antiseptic blue-green paint, the Police Department reminded me of my junior high school. The other day, when entering the front hall, I had seen policemen escorting men in chains—chains on their ankles and hands cuffed at their waists, like in the movies.

Usually I was the only reporter in the press room, and Sergeant Jack Johnson, the press officer, and I had taken to each other instantly.

“They sent me to that plane crash,” I said.

“You?”

I shrugged. “It was intense, but I handled it.”

“Happens sometimes.”

Jack seemed to appreciate my enthusiasm, although he couldn’t get over how little I knew. After reading my very first police report, I asked “What’s D.O.A.?” and he literally fell off his chair laughing.

“Girl,” he said, righting himself and brushing off what looked like sawdust. Pencil shavings? “Where’d you say you came from? I thought you were a city girl.” I was filled with regret that I had never watched cop shows on TV, but I let him slide on calling me “girl” since I was going to need his help.

This morning, I studied a long list of contents stolen in a “grand” larceny (more than one thousand dollars worth of goods) of a residence: gold jewelry, a fur coat, three televisions. “What’s a dildo?” I asked.

Jack howled. “Girlie, you’re killing me. I thought you were a college grad?”

“Girlie” crossed the line, and I scowled at Jack. He had the worst sideburns—too thick and too long. Too red.

“Another hold-up at the Circle K,” Jack said, showing me the report. Several of these convenience stores lined Route 3, a truck route that ran along the county corridor, and the favorite pastime seemed to be holding them up with sawed-off shotguns, whatever those were. I’d always enjoyed ducking into convenience stores, browsing through all the stuff: colored paper clips, Styrofoam cups, clothespins, safety pins, electrical adapters, candy made by companies I’d never heard of. Who used safety pins anyway? You got about one hundred in a pack when maybe you would need three in your entire life.

I was learning a lot reading the police reports. Initially, I was stunned that so many people had NMN in their name. John NMN Carter. Edward NMN Lee. “What’s this NMN? Some kind of Korean clan?” I asked Jack, which set him shrieking with laughter again.

“*No Middle Name*, girl. N-M-N: No Middle Name. That’s what it means.”

Everyone arrested was “released on his own recognizance.” I didn’t ask Jack what the hell that meant—I could look that up later, too. There were so many masked criminals wandering around Maryland, worse than long-ago Australia.

Driving to my newsroom, my nerves caught up with me again. Initial theories were that the small Cessna had hit a cross wind, causing it to roll over. It most certainly had clipped trees coming down.

I was thankful my father had never gotten his wish and learned to fly. Though he had missed out on active duty in World War II, he had been a civilian volunteer, trained to spot planes in the event of an air strike. My Aunt Rita, his youngest sister, had told me recently that my dad loved to build model planes as a boy, wonderful models. Their dad, a grandfather I had never known because he died when my father was fifteen, was a tailor, and one day he asked my father to give him one of the models for a customer.

“It was this beautiful, giant military plane,” Rita said. “Your father spent hours and hours on it, putting on the decals just so. He was meticulous with his models, and so fond of them.” When my father pleaded to keep the plane, my grandfather had smashed it into the wall, saying, “Now no one will have it.” Allegedly. Hard to believe his father could be that cruel. But though he was always nice to me, my father could be a little scary too.

Big Bill was always at his desk early, and he looked up and nodded when he saw me come in. From his small office he had a straight line of vision to my desk, and I wondered if he’d set things up like that intentionally, always having the new kid in his sights. “Heard you did a good job today,” he called out.

“Thanks,” I called back, heading over to the coffee station. I drank

a whole cup standing there, then poured another to take back to my desk—it was there for the taking—where I began typing up my police blurbs with great focus. They were rather formulaic. I followed examples in our back issues.

Fiery Love Triangle

County police have filed assault charges against a 24-year-old Suffern Park man who allegedly fired a pistol at his roommate after an argument over a woman.

The obits were even more straightforward:

Jacqueline Hubbard, 73, of Ocean City, died Aug. 15 at Johns Hopkins Hospital after a lengthy illness. Miss Hubbard, who attended St. Jerome High School, was a cosmetologist and Girl Scout Leader in Stockville for many years. She enjoyed ceramics.

After a while Little Bill arrived. Since he worked late laying out our paper two nights a week, he took his time getting in.

“Thanks for covering this morning. How’d it go?” he asked, picking up a stack of papers.

“That was something,” I said.

He gave me a sympathetic smile.

Soon Tim was there, too, and I admired how he got right down to work. It seemed he was always playing catch-up, needing to get everything written up fast so he could spend his afternoons and evenings attending the next set of games at local high schools and colleges.

But Catherine was the most impressive. She often had three lengthy pieces in each issue, all starting on the front page. Generally, she was out on assignments until three in the afternoon, then at her desk typing with gusto so she could leave at a reasonable hour. According to Tim, she was engaged to the county executive’s press secretary, which sounded like a conflict of interest to me.

My large consumption of coffee made me antsy. I couldn't sit still. Also, I felt self-conscious conducting phone interviews with the others around, something that didn't seem to bother them at all. I spent a lot of time listening in on the phone conversations of my colleagues.

So far, I was sure everyone could tell I was serious, and I made an effort to look busy, typing journal entries about my new surroundings, or letters to my brother and friends, instead of writing up articles between nine and five. I managed to do some phone interviews during the day—I had to—and found it easy to dash off the police blurbs and obits, but it wasn't until after the others left that I settled down and composed anything of substance.

It was a thrill to see my police blurbs in print, and I read my published obits over and over. Tonight, the plane crash piece would appear in *The Evening Courier*, and if I could get them ready, I would have two more bylines in *The Record* tomorrow: one about the banning of potato chips from lunch platters at Devon Elementary School, the other about the theft of a well-trained cockatiel from The Bird House on Ritchie Highway.

We all used IBM Selectrics and we typed on white sheets with pink margins and *The Anne Arundel Record* logo at the bottom. A pink sheet beneath produced a carbon copy. At the top of my articles I wrote:

By Nora Plowright
Staff Writer

If we made mistakes, we literally X'd over the words: XXXX. And at the end of every piece, we typed "-30-."

Little Bill had just told Tim how he'd sent me to the crash scene that morning.

"Really? You're so lucky," Tim said. "A byline in the daily and you've been here, what, two weeks? And with virtually no experience going in. Jeez, no one does that."

Like I said, I was more fortunate than most.