Killing My Own Snakes

A Memoir

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Extract

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‘You’re not at the bloody Savoy!’

‘There’s a dwarf in Oldham, says he was at school with Cary Grant,’ growled the News Editor, an irascible Scot. He stared at me malevolently over the huge handle-bar moustache adorning his blotchy face. On his desk, his special ‘moustache cup’ which had a shelf-like rim on one side designed to keep the facial foliage dry while he slurped his tea, heavily laced with single malt. ‘And, while you’re about it, lassie, there’s a flock of sheep frozen to death on the moors.’

‘Er, do we have an address for the dwarf?’ I asked nervously. ‘Or, indeed, the frozen sheep?’ I added. Tom Campbell’s expression darkened further. ‘*You* find the dwarf! This is called J-O-U-R-N-A-L-I-S-M, lassie. Not what you are used to at Oxford University!’ (he did a bizarre version of what he perceived to be my ‘lah-di-dah’ accent). ‘You find the dead sheep by looking for hooves sticking up over the snow. And you know what? You’re keeping a good man out of a job!’

Yeah, I knew – not least because he never stopped telling me. I was everything he hated: a woman, young, someone whom he could accuse of being ‘a bloody intellectual’, someone from the despised South, someone who was upper-middle-class, an Oxford graduate, privately educated, and thus someone who was ipso facto a ‘stuck-up snob’ – and, above all, someone who’d been hired by the loathed London Head Office in Fleet Street.

The only woman he rated was the fearsome Peggie, who he’d decided was one of ‘my boys’; I was informed, possibly inaccurately, that she dressed in a camouflage outfit of brown and green blobs, seemed able to match Campbell’s remarkable alcoholic intake, and was given to barking ‘Kill! Kill!’ And she was only covering the Pennines.

I, on the other hand, had been born and brought up as a

'daughter of the Raj' on the subcontinent, surrounded by servants. And later, walled up among nuns in damp, chilblain-riddled English convents. During my early life in India and Pakistan I had survived a riot (and still have small scars on my back), had experienced a bloody massacre on one of the 'killing trains' after Partition, had narrowly escaped death from a black krait snake, been bitten by a dog with rabies, and acquired all the emotion-dampening, shoulder-shrugging stoicism of a lonely expat child. But none of that equipped me for dealing with Tom Campbell.

And in any case, I'd never wanted to be a journalist. I was just filling in time before I decided what I really wanted to do. Forty-six years later I'm still 'filling in time'.

I certainly never expected to find myself being mortared, fired on by snipers and knifed by a would-be rapist in the Gulf, or interviewing a war criminal who boasted that the best way of punishing your enemies is to scoop their eyes out with a rusty spoon.

Or flirting over coffee with a chortling Gorbachev stranded on a ship in a Maltese storm. Or finding the urbane David Niven turn spiteful when I refused his attentions, or being proposed to by James Mason, or being bossed about by Mrs Thatcher over hairdos and campaign 'potty stops'.

Or being there in Communist East Berlin when the Wall came down, or chatting about make-up and their forthcoming execution with two female murderers on America's Death Row, or having my bad back cured by a voodoo priest in Haiti, or watching Nelson Mandela walk to freedom out of his prison gates in South Africa after twenty-seven years.

Or sharing 'substances' with Salvador Dali, or punching Muhammad Ali in the jaw to make him pay attention, or giving a gossip-hungry George W. Bush the latest on Camilla Parker Bowles.

Or indeed trudging blindly across the Buckingham Palace gravel (my contact lenses having popped out), wearing an absurd floral hat, in order to receive a Damehood from the Queen.

On day one of my arrival in the Manchester office, Tom Campbell informed me, 'You're not at the bloody Savoy today!' I had in fact never been to the Savoy, but I'd made the great mistake of turning up on my first day at work wearing what a woman's magazine had

said was suitable for a first job: 'neat, but not gaudy'. I'd bought a cheap copy of a Chanel suit.

But today I had to find a dwarf. So with a sinking heart I drove out on to the snow-covered moors. I didn't bother looking for sheep's hooves sticking up out of the drifts. I knew this brief, foolish, 'time-filling' attempt to be a journalist was at its end. I'd never done any university journalism, was at the time deeply uncurious about politics, crime and fashion – newspaper staples then and now – and had only got the newspaper job because a nice man from the *Daily Express*, whom I met in an Oxford pub, offered me it at the then stunningly lucrative wage of £20 a week.

I'd been a swot at school so had won a prestigious scholarship to Oxford and had consequently been listed in *The Times*; I was therefore much in demand on the recruitment 'milk round'. Languid young executives from top companies would take rooms in the Randolph Hotel, ply me with warm white wine and peanuts, and ask, 'Have you ever thought of a career in detergents?' '. . . in marketing?' '. . . in thread?' To which, of course, I could only reply 'No' and 'Er, frankly . . .' But I'd said yes to the journalism offer, and look where it had got me. Looking for a dwarf and some dead sheep.

Oldham at the time struck me as being full of deformed people, of often very restricted stature. Later I learned that because of poor nutrition and the historically grotesque working conditions in the mills, a high degree of congenital deformity did exist in the town. It was deeply shocking to me. I was used to the sight of limbless beggars, glaucous blind eyes and general deformity in India's bazaars but, well, the people there were *brown* . . .

But this was England! This was where the British Master Race dwelt, the site of the Mother of Parliaments, the Land of Hope and Glory of which we'd sing in my mountainous south Indian school, the home of Her Majesty, whose Official Birthday my parents had always celebrated on dusty lawns with sedate cocktails, where the invitation would command 'Decorations Will Be Worn.' Somehow I never expected such deprivation at 'home' (as expats in India would always call England, even if they had lived on the subcontinent for decades).

Eventually I tracked down the dwarf in question and found myself

standing in a blizzard outside his home, a back-to-back hovel in one of the mill town's soot-stained streets. I began reciting lines from Anglo-Saxon poetry to myself, to remind me that door-stepping dwarfs was not what I was put on earth for: 'Swa cwæð eardstapa earfeþa gemyndig' ('So spake the wanderer, mindful of hardship').

With furious, cold-triggered tears freezing on my cheeks, I suddenly found the dwarf beside me, asking, 'Lookin' for someone, love?'

'I'm from the *Daily Express*. Were you at school with Cary Grant?'

'Yes, love! But of course he were Archie Leach then, we was livin' in Bristol.'

He invited me in. 'Want a cuppa?' He lifted a huge iron kettle off the dead coal fire. He winked at me: 'The missus isn't here – so we can get away with havin' a cuppa!'

The kettle was full of neat Scotch; after quite a few 'cuppas' the dwarf and I were getting on like a house on fire. Then 'the missus' unexpectedly turned up. Unlike her husband, she was not a person of restricted growth; in fact, she seemd to me in my fairly drunken state as huge, wide and black as a coal lorry whose brakes had failed. And she was fizzing with rage. I fled out into the blizzard.

'Get the story?' asked John Scholes, the avuncular agricultural correspondent who shared a desk with me.

'Well, I don't know. I didn't bother looking for the sheep.'

'Good thing too. We know where sheep have been frozen to death because the farmers ring me. He only asked you to do that so you'd get stuck in a snow drift! Prove that, as a soft Southern lassie, you couldn't do the job! What about the dwarf and Cary Grant?'

'Well, I think he *was* at school with Cary Grant: the dates tally. But . . . .' And I told him the story as it happened.

'Write that. Cut out some of the stuff about the booze. Sounds like a short funny.' Which was what the Night Editor thought too: he printed it.

If I naively thought that getting a few paragraphs into an early regional edition might assuage Campbell's loathing, I was soon disabused. 'Bloody try and be clever with that, lassie!' he snarled next day, slapping down a note about a dispute over a budgie between two male pensioners, one dead, one alive. The alive one alleged that his dead friend had promised him his budgie in his will,

and the dead budgie owner's family were allegedly disputing it. 'Get a row goin'!' I was commanded.

Actually, I found I got quite emotionally involved in the budgie dispute. As a child in India I had a whole aviary of budgies which I adored. One day, as every day, I'd gone down to the end of the lush, wildly overgrown garden of our old East India Company mansion, the smell of the Indian Ocean filling my lungs, and found my huge budgie enclosure full of dead birds, their legs sticking up in the air, felled by some virus. I was utterly grief-stricken. So I knew how much budgies matter.

Trouble was, there was no row. The budgie owner's family were quite keen on getting rid of 'that scraggy old thing'. I got the impression they felt the same about the dearly departed himself. But I had indubitably failed. 'If you can't get a row going over a budgie dispute, you'll never make a journalist!'

My first scoop (though only in the Manchester edition) enraged Campbell even further. There was a woman in hospital, the victim of some crime. I can't remember the crime, or the woman's name, but I do remember the result of my getting the only interview with the woman in question.

The victim had told the hospital staff that she didn't want to speak to any press. Manchester's finest 'dogs of war' did what 'dogs of war' habitually did then: they dressed up as doctors, complete with stethoscopes; they tried climbing through windows; they alleged they were from 'Maintenance'; they asserted that they were concerned relatives and came laden with vast bouquets. Repulsed at every turn.

I thought I'd try a novel tack: I'd do it by the book. I would make an appointment with the Hospital Secretary, tell him who I was and what questions I'd like the crime victim to answer. He returned from talking to her and smiled: 'Mrs A says you sound like a nice, polite young woman, and certainly she'll talk to you.'

'How did you get this bloody story?' barked Campbell the next day.

'I asked the Hospital Secretary . . .'

'You did *what*?' His moustache bristled with rage. 'That's no way to get a story!'

'But,' I pointed out coolly, 'I did get it. And no one else did.'

One evening over a 'jar' (and they were never singular) with some of Campbell's lads, I stupidly mentioned that we had a tennis court at home: one of the lads handed this weapon to his boss. 'You're not on your bloody tennis court today, lassie!'

He constantly put me on the 'dog-watch' which began at 4.30 p.m. and finished in the small hours. I had to do the 'cop-shop round', which meant going to police stations in Dickensian slums like Moss Side, full of squalor and crime, and asking the desk sergeants, 'Do you have a story for the *Daily Express*?' If they did have a story they wouldn't of course give it to this slip of a girl; they'd phone their Crime Desk chums (some of whom paid them handsomely for 'tips'). I would sit there drinking mugs of tea and tell them how miserable I was, how badly I was being treated, and sometimes a sergeant would take pity on me and say, 'There, love, this might help.' For the price of a few tears, I'd get a 'tip'.

Funnily enough, I quite enjoyed this. The desk sergeants were kind, and the 'tips' introduced me to places and people I never suspected existed in Britain: lice-infested bedrooms, carpet cut-offs soaked in urine, foul-mouthed, semi-literate families who constantly thumped their pale, scabby children. But I couldn't afford to do the cop-shop round. The all-night buses were not all-night in the places I was sent to; I couldn't get home except by taxi.

My apparently plutocratic £20 a week was dwindling by the day. John Scholes then told me that I actually had employment rights: 'You can put the cabs on expenses. Join the Union.' Which I did. The National Union of Journalists has enraged me many times over the decades, but because of those early days when it forced an incandescent Campbell to cough up for my late-night cab fares I still remain loyal.

Every night I'd feed coins into a vomit-scented phone box, ring my boyfriend Michael in London and sob, 'I hate this job, this job hates me, I'm chucking it in!' But I didn't. Campbell and I were locked in a deadly battle – about class, education and above all gender – and I was damned if I was going to lose it to this ghastly, failed, fraudulent old drunk. I fully intended to leave – but on my terms. Modern feminism hadn't really been invented then, but I was innately feminist enough to know that I wouldn't be driven out of a

job – even one I hated – merely because of the genital arrangements I was born with.

The huge staffs of the Northern branches of the national papers consisted of hordes of feral tribesmen, heavy-drinking, heavy-fighting warriors (there were 700 hacks based in Manchester alone) who regarded namby-pamby talk about 'journalistic ethics' – even if they had ever heard the phrase – as an unforgivable attack on their manhood. 'Aye, lass, but you should see us in Glasgow!' one visiting Scottish newsman told me. 'We're much worse!' he added with pride.

In those days there seemed to be two stories which particularly enthused the Northern ferals: competitive potholing and competitive leek-growing. Perhaps because neither activity took place in the namby-pamby South.

Luckily I didn't have to 'get a row goin'' among the leek-growers of Northumberland. They did that themselves. The mines in the area were still flourishing and so were their fiercely competitive Leek Clubs; Geordie miners were dourly fanatical about rearing their monster leeks, which they fed with a mixture of manure, dried blood, brown ale and various 'secret ingredients', in the hope of winning a prize, perhaps even a three-piece suite. But mostly of course so that they could triumph over their mates down the pit. (The comedian Rob Brydon, despite being Welsh, hates the leek; it is, he notes mysteriously, 'a very *argumentative* vegetable'. Maybe Rob's been to the World Leek-growing Championship in Ashington.)

For a Southerner, Geordie can be fairly incomprehensible, but I understood enough to be amazed at the amount of fear and loathing that was generated by this harmless member of the allium family. I was told many a conspiratorial tale of 'nobblers' who, at dead of night, would creep into a rival's leek beds and stick a needle or fire an airgun pellet into the other man's plants. 'Aye, duck, I know who the nobblers are,' one competitor informed me darkly. 'Why else do you think I've been sitting up all night for the last fortnight wrapped in blankets to make sure me leeks aren't nobbled this time!'

But surely these massive things can't be any good to eat? 'Eat? Eat? You don't want to *eat* a prize-winning leek!' As the son of one competitive leek-grower put it, 'You would no more eat a prize leek than you would a racehorse that had just won the Derby!' He

remembered how one legendary self-made millionaire used to take his beloved leeks to the show wrapped up in white towels on the back seat of his Rolls.

As for the potholers: being solitary underground types, they were hardly on the surface long enough to 'get a row goin'' with their rivals. This did not apply, however, to the newsmen above ground. The Northern editions of the nationals were always 'buying up' potholers who were trying to break records for staying underground in dripping caves. Our proprietor Lord Beaverbrook did not approve of cheque-book journalism but his editors would get round that minor inconvenience by putting the sums down as 'hospitality to contacts'.

I was once detailed to 'babysit' the wife of one such potholer we'd bought up. His wife lived in a bleak stone cottage high in the Pennines, with no phone, no electricity, no lock on the door, an outside lavatory and a dingy, deaf, asthmatic dog. The only 'decoration' was a couple of souvenirs of Blackpool Tower and a Kilner jar containing some stones. 'Oh, what are these?' I asked brightly by way of the sort of small talk I'd learned at Karachi cocktail parties. 'Them's his kidney stones,' she replied glumly.

One evening, there was a violent thumping on the door. 'No, no! Don't answer it! That's *my* job!' I trilled at the wife, who was gloomily consuming Strong Lager out of the bottle. Suddenly the door burst open, and a huge ginger thug, whom I recognized as a member of the *Daily Mirror*'s 'heavy mob', appeared in the doorway – and instantly punched me in the face, giving me a black eye. The by then near-comatose potholer's wife suddenly sprang into furious action, firing lumps of coal at him, forcing a retreat. We celebrated our joint victory with another bottle of Strong Lager.

Of course, it never occurred to me to report the *Mirror* man to the police for GBH, or to try to sue him, or indeed complain to the office. The odd black eye from a professional rival was just an occupational hazard. Whenever I hear media commentators talking about how press behaviour has degenerated since the Good Old Days, I find myself thinking, 'Oh really? You evidently weren't at the *Express* in Manchester at the beginning of the Sixties.'

Every journalist dreaded having to do the 'death-knock' routine, which involved knocking on a front door and breaking the news of

the sometimes gruesome death of a relative to their loved ones. Mercifully Campbell stopped sending me on 'death knocks', because I was far too squeamish to nick family photos from the house when the bereaved weren't looking. 'You'll never become a proper reporter if you carry on like this!'

Apart from potholers and leek-growing, the Northern editions went big on 'slip editions'. These were special inserts, consisting of up to six pages, full of advertisements, distributed inside the normal paper at agricultural shows, antiques fairs or – my particular nightmare – the Harrogate Toy Fair. Single-handedly I was obliged to produce endless 'amusing' and/or 'heart-warming' stories about teddy-bear manufacturers or gollywog makers (political correctness hadn't yet dawned), get all the biographical details right, and flatter the lot of them. But, I have to admit, it was great training for a job which, I was convinced, would not last long.

At the Toy Fair I met a woman called Jean Rook for the first time. She was working for the *Yorkshire Post* and swept into the toy-crammed auditorium wearing a huge red cloak and what looked to me like a vast black wig in the shape of a medieval warrior's helmet. I suspected she somehow spelled trouble. And so it proved. The *Yorkshire Post* was a respected newspaper but it was regional, and the *Daily Express* was then a powerful and successful national; she clearly resented that fact. I tried to escape the cloak and the wig. After all, it wasn't my fault that I was on a national, albeit in the provinces, and besides, I wasn't going to hang around long enough in the job ever to be a threat to her.

But La Rook descended on me to give me her views on both my pitiful youth and my equally pitiful experience. I quaked. Unfortunately I quaked again when, nearly twenty years later, she and I were obliged, through an organizational mix-up, to share a bedroom in a grand Leeds hotel. We were both getting awards at a Gala Dinner, complete with fanfares from the State Trumpeters, given by the charity the Variety Club of Great Britain. My award was for 'journalism and broadcasting', hers for 'journalism'. She was evidently thoroughly miffed that someone whom she regarded as one of life's obvious also-rans was not only sharing the same room with her but getting a similar award. She treated me to a repeat performance of her Toy Fair put-downs.

By then she'd become the most famous female columnist in Fleet Street, had dubbed herself journalism's 'First Lady', ensured that she was photographed with every luminary she interviewed, and made my husband Michael – who was always fiendishly jealous on my behalf – sourly declare, 'If Jean Rook is the First Lady of Fleet Street, then I'm the Queen of Siam!' She was the original inspiration for *Private Eye*'s Glenda Slagg, and her last column before she died was a love letter to the great tenor she called 'Fatty Pavarotti'. 'This man', she wrote, 'is a mountain any woman yearns to climb!'

What made me so miserable in Manchester – apart from a sexist, bullying News Editor and a brief encounter with a journalistic diva – was the utter 'foreignness' of the North. I was used, as a child, to spending time in Basra in Iraq (all I remember was its charm and its palm trees), Kabul in Afghanistan (full of rose gardens then), and remote parts of India when my oil executive father was 'on tour', where villagers would swathe me, laughing, with heavily scented flower garlands and stuff my eager mouth with brightly coloured sweetmeats. But I had never felt as foreign as I did in Manchester. I remembered how the Regency dandy Beau Brummell, on being told that his regiment was being posted to the city, resigned his commission: 'Sir, when I purchased my commission it was on condition that I was never posted abroad!'

It had begun well though. Michael – then just my boyfriend – told me that he'd take some time off from the BBC and would drive me there. He had a clapped-out Standard Ten: it had no heating, its indicators were short, spavined arms which would regularly, with a thump, shoot out of the side unbidden, and it had great difficulty cresting the most pimply of hills. He'd have to rev the clattering little beast into a fury, then press the accelerator to the rust-thinned floor in the hope that the Standard would manage to catapult itself over the obstacle. This usually worked in Surrey; the Pennines, alas, struck the Standard as the equivalent of the north face of the Eiger.

But we were young, in love, and giggled a lot. On the way we even checked into Coventry's 'finest hotel', the Leofric, as 'Mr and Mrs', which deceit added no end to the sexual excitement. Michael and a previous girlfriend had been evicted at the dead of night from a Cotswold hostelry when the landlady surmised, correctly, that – despite the fake wedding ring – the two of them were 'living in sin'.

At one of the convents I attended, I'd asked the Reverend Mother whether it was okay for me to be godmother to my best friend's baby. She'd been expelled from the school as a 'fallen woman' when she became pregnant, and although she and her boyfriend later married, Reverend Mother was firm: 'God would not be pleased. She has lived in sin, and by agreeing to be this girl's godmother you are, my child, conniving in sin.' (And I'm afraid I did refuse my friend's request.)

Finally, having 'lived in sin' with giddy enjoyment, Michael and I and the exhausted Standard eventually neared our destination: we were driving down the road from Snake Pass into the outskirts of Manchester.

Spread out below us was a vision of a Gustave Doré hell. Night was falling and blotches of yellow, sulphur-smelling fog hung over a devastated, rubble-strewn cityscape. The old slums were being demolished (to be replaced by new slums) and in places Manchester looked like Hiroshima after the bomb; sticking up above the rubble like rotten teeth were blackened churches, chapels and pubs. Oh God, I thought, what have I done, signing up to this benighted city: why didn't I go for a 'career in thread' after all?

The office had assigned me accommodation: the Land O'Cakes pub in Great Ancoats Street, across the road from a mini-version of the *Express*'s Fleet Street HQ (a vast black-glass 1930s edifice, nicknamed the Black Lubianka after the KGB headquarters in Moscow). Ancoats was at the rough, fisticuffs end of Manchester, surrounded by still-functioning factories and mills; the *Daily Mail*, then a fading, failing newspaper, dying of genteel good taste, was ensconced in Deansgate, the 'posh' part of the city.

I was shown into my room by the landlady, Mildred. It stank. I soon realized why. An *Express* heavy-mob photographer had been its previous occupant and he had a simple solution to the frequent complaints from his colleagues about his rancid socks: he'd get some new ones and sling the worst-smelling ones under the bed, where they remained radiating an odour like over-ripe Reblochon. They were still there when I checked in.

Breakfast the next morning was a fry-up consisting of watery fried eggs, baked beans, fatty bacon and white doorsteps of bread. None of the other lodgers addressed a word to me, most of them being too

hung over to speak. Even Mildred was rather cool. She liked 'her boys' and I was clearly not one of them.

Night-time was worse. The printers used the Land O'Cakes as their local, and although licensing hours were short and strict in those days, 'exceptions' were made in their case: the landlady would simply call 'time' on non-printers and would then institute a lock-in for the 'inkies'. Often included among those locked in would be a local bobby, who'd blackmail the illegal drinkers by demanding 'contributions' to police charity funds.

On late shifts (and I was constantly put on those) I'd have to bang on the door and persuade boss-eyed and drunken printers, who were eating chip butties and 'playing the spoons' (a Northern pastime of which I'd previously never heard), that yes, I was indeed a resident. I would then fight my way through the bar and the catcalls – 'Show us a leg, love!' – up the back stairs and into my sock-stinking room.

There was another 'graduate trainee journalist' in Manchester called Gerry. He too had just come down from a 'posh' university but he had the inestimable advantage of being born a man. Not just any man, but a tall, blond, athletic specimen who was tremendously good at sport and who, moreover, was said to have done national service in the Paras.

Campbell adored the military and aped the lingo of his heroes. He would, on occasion, inform his minions that he was going to ambush the enemy camp at the Fleet Street HQ and 'fight for my lads!' Whether he ever did was a moot point. As for sport, my fellow trainee was able to take time off to play football because, as Campbell informed him, 'We're a sporting regiment here, laddie!' Mind you, there were possibly libellous rumours that Campbell had never actually served in the war: 'in-growing toenails or something'.

Which might explain why he was so horrible to his bullet-headed, stiff-backed deputy Bob Blake, who'd been a tank driver at Alamein and was eventually awarded an MBE. Blake was middle-class and privately educated, sins for which he paid dearly. However, I loathed Blake almost as much as I loathed his boss. Later I learned that, as a protection mechanism in the army he'd affected a cockney accent because, like me, he'd hitherto been rather 'lah-di-dah'. Unfortunately he'd had to join the ranks rather than become an officer

because as a schoolboy he'd been hauled up in front of a magistrate for some minor misdemeanour.

In later years, whenever I got a scoop or won an award, I would say to myself, 'Another one in the eye for Campbell and Blake!' When I received the first of two Lifetime Achievement Awards, I got a self-exculpatory letter from Blake admitting that he knew he'd bullied me and regretted it, but that he too was bullied. 'One day I must tell you of the editors (now dead) who drove us on the desk to extend no help to women reporters.'

The 'lads', unlike me, found Blake's bullying madly amusing. The News Desk secretary Jean kept a verbatim, but secret, note of Blake's remarks to his underlings. 'I have no objection to women on newspapers. I think women on newspapers can be a good thing for us. Just so long as they are on other newspapers.' 'Bottle-washing, that's what you university graduates have got to do here! And I'll certainly see that you get a few dirty bottles to wash! Especially you *women* graduates!'

I resented the way Campbell and Blake did all they could to make my male fellow trainee journalist feel at home in the Northern Lubianka. I'd heard rumours of the existence of a document called the Style Book which apparently told new *Express* journalists how to write news stories. I never saw it because, I learned, the Campbell/Blake combo had told my fellow trainee not to give it to me because 'she might learn something'.

Somehow I did learn something, possibly osmotically. According to the Style Book, one must always put the location of a news story near the end of the piece, otherwise people who didn't live there wouldn't be interested in it. Bizarrely, the word 'leukaemia' was *verboten* – apparently our proprietor Lord Beaverbrook (always referred to as the Old Man) found the word alarming – and one had to use the phrase 'a rare blood disease'. One could also never mention Marlene Dietrich (not that, in Manchester, her name was daily on anyone's lips), presumably because the Old Man had an aversion to her.

Whether or not included in the Style Book, the word 'vivacious' if applied to a woman was not to be recommended, because it was seen as code for 'no better than she should be'. Perhaps, on the

same grounds, the word 'pert' was to be avoided: I had innocently described someone as 'a pert blonde'; her father came round to the office wanting to thump me for 'casting aspersions' on his daughter. *Express* 'style' seemed to demand that a celebratory family meal would always consist of 'roast beef and all the trimmings' which would always be 'washed down' with 'bubbly'. The *Express* rules for writing stories seemed to be as rigid as those for writing a sonnet or a haiku, but since I didn't know about them, I couldn't obey them. So I just wrote what I saw.

Ever since then I've felt very unconfident about writing straightforward news stories; I've always, not quite truthfully, breezily declared that 'I don't do News: I wouldn't recognize a news story if it bit me in the ankle!' Though I was never as hopeless as the Edwardian journalist who was sent to cover the launch of a ship and returned to inform his editor, 'I'm afraid there's no story. The ship sank.' But I wasn't far off it.

Phil Finn, one of the Ancoats Street heavy mob, who was a fellow Land O'Cakes lodger and went on to be a star news reporter, said, 'Ann could write like a dream, but she couldn't pen a short par about a man falling off his bike in Ancoats.'

Another young journalist who later also became a source of the Manchester News Desk's ire was Paul Dacre, who'd just graduated from Leeds University: apart from being 'too young, brash and cocky', his crime, I later learned, was that he was from the South, had been to public school and had been hired 'only because his father is a famous Fleet Street journalist'. Dacre soon moved South and eventually became the legendarily successful editor of the *Daily Mail*, whereas the Campbell/Blake duo's beloved overstaffed and drunken Manchester *Express* office eventually shrivelled and died.

But mostly what I learned was how to see off assorted sexist, bullying men – like news editors, cross-eyed gunmen, war criminals, prospective rapists, the whole bloody lot – and Campbell (inadvertently) taught me how to deal with them. So, perversely, I'm almost grateful to him.

I picked up other (then invaluable, but now redundant) skills like the removal of diaphragms from the handsets in public phone-boxes to stop your rivals filing their stories. The sharpest rivals would

always carry spare diaphragms in their pockets; newspapers were always tut-tutting about the vandalizing of phone boxes, and I sometimes wondered whether much of the vandalism was perpetrated by us. I also learnt how to remove the distributor heads from rivals' cars; to this day the only part of a car engine I can recognize.

And of course, I learned how to drink. These days journalists spend lunch breaks – if they have them – hunched over their computers 'googling', with a Prêt à Manger sarnie and a fruit smoothie. In my youth as a 'trainee reporter' I was mostly trained in how to spend hours in the pub, drinking the 'ferals' under the table. One evening in Yates's Wine Lodge, which had sawdust on the floor – presumably to mop up booze, blood and vomit – I overheard one of my colleagues saying, 'That young Leslie lass has hollow legs.' I'm appalled to remember that I was actually proud of the fact. It meant I was 'one of the lads'.

Not one of Campbell's lads, of course. He'd take a select group of what he called his 'Young Lions' to Yates's or the Crown and Kettle, a former courthouse, run by Carmen who served her favourite lads a peculiar Portuguese red wine called Periquita which tasted of iron filings; they'd reel back to the office moaning, 'I'm completely Periquita-ed!'

The pub's old court benches were always lined with the local ladies of the night, who were Carmen's chums and who gossiped raucously about the rubbish fellers they'd serviced the night before. But for their profession these jolly ladies could have been members of the Women's Institute out on a spree. They always wore curlers and headscarves, which would only be removed when they set off to 'work' of an evening. Actually, most Northern working-class women then wore headscarves all day; in many Northern city suburbs the Muslim hejab is today's equivalent, though donned, of course, for a rather different reason.

Years later John Edwards, my *Daily Mail* colleague in Fleet Street, wrote a nostalgic piece about the now virtually extinct drinking culture of journalism. He recalled how the great wordsmith Vincent Mulchrone would begin every day by taking a cab from Waterloo Station to the Harrow pub next door to the *Mail*'s office. He'd look up and down the street for cops and 'then, at 9.45 a.m., they opened

the door quickly for him and he went into the back bar. Half a bottle of Moët et Chandon was always in an ice bucket on the counter. If it was a really bad day, he would take a Fernet Branca as a chaser.'

John was equally misty-eyed recalling the drinking exploits of World War II veteran foreign correspondent Don Wise, who always went to war in a cravat, and who sent a dispatch from Angola which began: 'The first African I saw killed in war almost fell into my drink.' Then, according to John, Wise called the waiter to 'bring him another glass'.

The old Fleet Street cherished tales about its legendary drinkers. Like, for example, the reporter Mick McDonough who one day reeled into the *Sun* office to be greeted by his editor Larry Lamb with the words: 'Pissed again, McDonough!' To which a slurry McDonough managed to reply: 'So am I, Larry, so am I!'

Edwards also described me. 'Ann Leslie usually bought the last one only for herself since the guys she started off with were half-dead on the floor. Sitting later at her desk, the words were hammered into a beaten-up Adler typewriter while she was singing a song. That's how it was then.' Yes, that's how it was. (Though one slight correction, John: I don't sing.)

The new sobriety in what's still called 'Fleet Street' – although no newspaper dwells there now – is, of course, despised by the old-timers. In the words of René Cutforth, one of the greatest foreign correspondents: 'In the old days we were all drunk, late with our stories, and the stuff was good! Now they're all sober, meet their deadlines, and their copy is crap!'

The old Fleet Street, albeit highly competitive, could be surprisingly protective of its fellow tribesmen. When a friend of mine, a particularly affable columnist, was sent to cover the Polisario guerrilla war in the Western Sahara he received a fairly typical Fleet Street war wound: he imbibed a little too freely on the plane, fell over on arrival in the hotel bathroom, broke his leg, and therefore couldn't go to the front line. His fellow tribesmen wrote and filed his dispatches for him. They didn't even take umbrage – let alone rat on him – when 'his' articles received an honourable mention at the British Press Awards.

Surprising numbers of these legendary drunks survived into old age; Don Wise himself lived until he was eighty. And even René

Cutforth, who ended his career doing TV adverts for Krona margarine, didn't expire until he was seventy-five; the obituary in one paper had the headline 'Krona Man Dead'. I'd always assumed that Tom Campbell would die of cirrhosis but 'he could hold his drink, you know,' one of his erstwhile Young Lions told me. 'He died slipping on some icy steps and cracked his skull. And he was sober at the time.'

One day the Northern editor emerged from his office and came over to my desk. 'There's something going on called a "Youthquake". I want you to write a column for teenagers – pop music, fashion, that sort of thing.' But, I protested, I know nothing about teenagers – my teenage years had been spent overseas or in semi-foster homes or convents. I was also totally ignorant about fashion and had a tin ear for music. The only music I listened to at home was my father's favourites, the Peruvian soprano Yma Sumac and Sibelius's 'Swan of Tuonela', neither of which I thought would equip me for the new 'Youthquake' scene.

'Well, you're the youngest person here, so get on with it.'

And I did, if only to get out from under Campbell's thumb. The only teenagers I was allowed to write about had to exist south of the Scottish border and north of the Potteries.

So I'd ring various spotty youths in Lancashire skiffle clubs who were, alas, rather more articulate on the washboard than on the phone, until I finally found a bright, funny Liverpool boy called John Lennon in a group called the Beatles; I'd keep ringing up his manager, Brian Epstein, would arrange a chat with John, and then gratefully scribble down his funny, sinus-clogged aperçus on more or less anything.

One day the editor told me: 'Too many of these "Insects", or whatever they call themselves, on your page.'

'Actually, as you know, they're called the Beatles.'

'Don't care what they're called – sounds as if you're in their pay.'

Epstein rang me one day: 'Why don't you come to Liverpool and . . .'

'Sorry, Brian, the editor says I'm not to put the Beatles on my page any more.' Barely eighteen months later the Beatles became the biggest pop group in the world, and Epstein never took my calls again.

By now I had moved out of the Land O'Cakes and rented a lace-

curtained semi on the Didsbury Road with a young South African actress with curly red hair whom I'd met in the New Theatre Inn, the actors' pub near the Library Theatre. Her real name was Janet Suzman, but her agent had told her to change it because it 'sounds too foreign'. To which Jan replied, 'But what about Ingrid Bergman's name? That's foreign and it doesn't seem to have harmed her!'

'But Bergman is a *Swedish* name.' Unlike Suzman which was, perhaps, a little too Jewish for the time.

So Janet Manners she became for a short while – a rather limp, who's-for-tennis kind of name – which didn't suit her feisty, exotic, witty personality. As a rep actress she was earning £13 for eight performances a week. Our semi soon became open house for all the actors passing through. David Scase, the Library Theatre's director, who reared a host of future stars – among them Anthony Hopkins, Robert Stephens, Alan Rickman, Martin Jarvis and Patrick Stewart – had a tremendous eye for talent. Especially if the talent was young and pretty. 'Though he never made a pass at either of us,' recalls Jan. 'We were not unsexy but I think we were both quite fierce.'

Jan taught me how to cook what we still agree was her 'legendary Spag Bol': we'd buy tins of cheap mince, fish out all the yellow gristly bits, slosh in bottles of red wine and brandy, boil it all up and pour steaming globs of it over some pasta. 'Our drunken cookery was *divine*, wasn't it? Everyone adored it!' remembers Jan. Our Sunday early-afternoon breakfast speciality was toast and marmalade topped with towering pinnacles of whipped cream full of 'lots and lots of brandy'; we and any visiting thesps would spend most of Sunday reeling about with 'huge brandy-cream moustaches on our upper lips'.

And then disaster struck. For me, anyway. John Barton of the Royal Shakespeare Company had seen Jan on stage at the Library and invited her to audition for *The Wars of the Roses*. Peter Hall was watching and hired her on the spot. On hearing Jan's exciting news I once more trudged to the phone box down the road with a sack of tuppenny pieces and rang Michael in London: 'I'm distraught! Jan's left me and gone to Stratford to become a star! I can't stay on in this horrible city without her!' Janet did indeed become a star and, on her marriage to Trevor Nunn, became for a while one half of the most glamorous theatrical couple of the time.

Her departure made me determined to stick to this miserable attempt to be a journalist for precisely one year. After that I would abandon Manchester and journalism for good. And then, eleven months after my arrival, a deus ex machina, a tall, handsome man with a fenderful of startlingly white teeth (he became known to his many enemies as the Smiling Shark) descended on the Ancoats Lubianka and rescued me.

It was Bob Edwards, the *Express*'s Fleet Street editor. In those days of flourishing regional offices it was the custom of Fleet Street editors, like medieval monarchs, to visit their far-flung vassals to give them encouragement. Or, in Edwards's case, to terrify them. The visit resulted in Campbell and Blake instantly transforming themselves, albeit temporarily, into a couple of Uriah Heeps.

Edwards called me in and informed me that I was being transferred to Fleet Street to write a column. He later told me, 'The main reason for giving you a column was because you were young. Besides, I could never get control over the Features Department, and with one or two exceptions none of them were any good. I thought you might improve things.'

On hearing of my promotion Campbell became apoplectic with disbelief. True, he'd wanted to get rid of me from day one. But he didn't want me to leave *in bloody triumph*. The only words he addressed to me were, 'Mark my words, lassie, the editor has made a big mistake!' I feared that he was right, but I was too excited by my liberation from Ancoats to care.

All I had to do was pack up fast and sublet the semi to one of the Library Theatre thesps: a young, but already bald, Patrick Stewart. Over the intervening decades I'd mutter, every time I was channel-flipping and saw him on *Star Trek*, 'Captain Picard, you *still* owe me rent!'

This was the second time that Bob Edwards had become editor of the *Express*. Lord Beaverbrook's son, the Hon. Max Aitken, who was chairman of the board – but whose only discernible talents were for power-boat racing and bedding women – had fired him without consulting Beaverbrook. He was obliged by his furious father to rehire him a year later.

When Edwards was fired for the first time, many on the staff celebrated with champagne. On the return of the Smiling Shark they

knew that a night of the long knives awaited them and they'd probably be sacked.

Once I was installed in the large, windowless Features Room in the *Express* HQ, I could see why; very few in there ever seemed to do any work for the paper. One delicate soul would play his violin behind the filing cabinets when upset, which was often. Another would disappear for days on end and the office would have to field calls from far-flung locations – one of which I took from a Dunfermline police station informing me, 'We've got someone here, says he works for the *Daily Express*, but he's run out of money. He's acting a bit funny, and says he can't get home.'

The paper, high on circulation success, was traditionally extraordinarily forgiving towards the many wayward members of its staff. While I was there, one of its numerous foreign correspondents was sent to cover the civil war in the Congo. Before leaving, he had a few snifters in El Vino's in Fleet Street, but nevertheless managed to make it to the plane. Unfortunately it stopped to refuel in Lagos. And so did he. He got so smashed in the transit lounge that after he'd returned to what he thought was his plane it took off and landed, not as he'd expected, in Leopoldville, but back at Heathrow. Nothing for it, of course, but to return to El Vino's where he was discovered by his Foreign Editor. Was he sacked? No, he was merely demoted to being 'Our Religious Affairs Correspondent'.

One of the feature writers who shared my desk never wrote a word unless it was on his expenses sheet; these were highly creative documents, since he never left the office except to go round the corner to Poppins, the *Express* pub. There was an elderly and demented features secretary with dyed cochineal hair who habitually flung the phone at a particular feature writer whom she disliked. Michael Parkinson, a former *Express* man, then working for Granada Television, would wander in and his old colleagues would always have plenty of time for an affable chat.

The William Hickey social diary was situated near us and, from time to time, we'd hear the odd scream as the Diary Editor and his minions would seize their favourite whipping boy, string him up feet first, and dump him in the wastepaper basket. To get to the Diary sadists' den, people had to walk through Features. I kept noticing a

cocky young man in a tight, shiny blue suit sashaying through our office scattering laughter and quips. 'Who's that?' I asked.

'Some Aussie called Nigel Dempster who's been hired to shag duchesses.' He eventually married the daughter of a count, then the daughter of a duke, and became the most famous gossip columnist of the time.

A rather eccentric, dreamy girl called Jane Gaskell was always writing novels in office time and seemed to regard being asked to write something for her employer as a violation of her privacy. Thanks to her bestseller about a window cleaner in the Swinging Sixties, *All Neat in Black Stockings* (later made into a film), the *Oxford English Dictionary* credits her with having invented the word 'plonker'.

There were undoubtedly an awful lot of plonkers on the paper then, one of whom was Denis Pitts, who'd made a name for himself covering Suez and Moscow, but Bob Edwards sacked him anyway. 'He just couldn't be bothered; he was always asleep at his desk. He really irritated me. Whenever I remonstrated with him, he treated me like dirt.' Pitts went on to become a film-maker and novelist, with both of which jobs he evidently could be bothered.

In fact it struck me that Bob was always on the point of sacking people, sometimes without justification, apart from irritation with the person concerned. One such example was Nancy Banks-Smith, who went on to work for the *Guardian* and become one of the most consistently witty and brilliant television critics.

One day I was in his office trying to stick up for her copy (and I wasn't a friend of hers). He snapped at me, 'Why does she have to be so ugly?' I was shocked by the remark because obviously what Nancy looked like had no relevance to her writing. Besides, it made me nervous: I was no beauty myself. Bob too was shocked when I reminded him decades later of what he'd said. 'She wasn't ugly, but she was always very unkempt. And I didn't sack her! She left!'

Clearly I too was somewhat unkempt because one day he ordered me to get three smart new outfits and charge them to expenses. The first of these was from Mary Quant, the high priestess of Sixties fashion, who had declared that, thanks to her frocks, 'Middle age has been abolished!'

Bob, who looked tremendously middle-aged to me, was not entranced. The frock was a short, mustard-yellow, 'flapper' tunic dress with black trimming round the neck and a black sash on the hips. I adored it. Later I told Mary Quant that, alas, I could only wear her dress off-duty as it was clearly too 'advanced' for my editor. My second and third outfits were so middle-aged that he could happily declare, 'You could go and interview the Archbishop of Canterbury in those!'

Although I was terrified of him, Bob was never anything but kind to me. But I hated writing the column because, at twenty-two, I felt I was too young to have anything interesting to say. When I told him I didn't want to write it any more, he was astonished: newspapers weren't the thick, column-littered volumes they are today; to be given a column in those more slim-line newspaper days was a much sought-after honour.

'Funnily enough,' he mused years later, 'I always thought you rather resented me for giving you the column in the first place.' But my column embarrassed me, as had my 'Youthquake' page in the Northern editions; I'd cringe every time I saw huge posters bearing my name and face on the sides of Manchester buses urging the populace to read 'The Ann Leslie Page'. And I cringed even more at the first headline over my new column: 'A Provocative New Name – and she's 22!' Why on earth, I thought, would anyone want to read the twitterings of this wet-behind-the-ears young woman?

Mind you, this 'provocative new name' certainly managed to provoke Lady Beaverbrook. The Old Man, who clearly had not yet made up his mind about the new column, passed on his wife's criticisms to the editor. With the smooth, Jeeves-like manner he employed when dealing with the Old Man, Edwards replied, 'Thank you for letting me see Lady Beaverbrook's comments on Ann Leslie's column. I think these criticisms are extremely sound, and I must bear the burden of them, because I passed the column which comes under my personal direction like all the other columns.' But in fact he never asked me to change a word of anything I wrote, and he never told me at the time that my 'provocative' column had seriously provoked the proprietor's wife.

The Old Man, however, soon took an interest in the column himself. Alarmingly, he started sending me letters from his house on Cap d'Ail on the French Riviera.

One such letter in January 1964 began: 'Dear Ann, I have been reading your column. I admire it very much. It is extremely good and I think you are going to make a great columnist.' There then followed alternating paragraphs of praise and criticism. One of the paragraphs took exception to my sympathetic remarks about Jackie Kennedy: 'Someone should remind her that she is the nation's widow – and that the nation's widow should not dine with Brando in public.'

The Old Man's letters terrified me. How was I to respond? Should I try to stick up for myself? This would have been hard since I was convinced that my stuff was dreadful anyway. Should I try to charm him? But I'd never met him and had no idea what he might find charming.

Mercifully, the leader writer George Malcolm Thomson, who was close to Beaverbrook, gave me some useful advice. 'Just remind him that you are still very young, and that you're determined to learn from his *very valid* criticisms. The most important thing, however, is never to send him your reply in an unused envelope: the Old Man thinks that staff who use new envelopes are being very extravagant with his money.'

I would therefore pick up a new envelope, spill coffee on it, stick a stamp on it and grind it underfoot until it was in a fit state to be sent to His Lordship. Bob Edwards's secretary kept a waste-bin full of used envelopes precisely for this purpose.

Then one day a call came from the Old Man's secretary. He was returning from the South of France and wanted me to come and have lunch with him and Lady Beaverbrook at Cherkley Court, his home in Surrey. Wow! Another one in the eye for Campbell and Blake! The Old Man only invited journalists he admired to Cherkley! I'd arrived!

A fortnight before I was due to meet him, I got a call from Cherkley telling me that the Old Man was very ill, so the lunch was postponed. He died not long afterwards, and I was furious. Yes, he was eighty-five, but couldn't he have hung on a bit longer for me?

My fury at the Old Man's 'premature' death suddenly made me realize, for the first time, that a job which I'd embarked on largely by accident was now perhaps in danger of becoming a lifetime career.