

## **My First Real Job**

by Pam Munter

At twenty-one, few of us fully understand who we are yet, and that inevitable identity struggle was in full flower in 1964 in Boston. Surviving college was easy compared to juggling the existential weight of making the next big decision. It seemed so important, as if that first post-college job would set the course for the rest of my life. I was wrong about that. My first real job lasted all of four months.

I had graduated from the University of California at Berkeley with a degree in journalism a few months earlier and applied for a job as a “copykid” with the *Christian Science Monitor* in Boston. My tenuous religious attachment arose from my adolescent worship of film star Doris Day, who was everything I wanted to be. She was also a Christian Scientist, so I—lacking an informed belief system—started attending our local church in Pacific Palisades, California when I was fifteen. I liked its intellectualism, the lack of ritual and pretension, and the handy book (*Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures*) to which I could refer for life’s answers. The bond was reinforced by a warm reception from the church community. College jarred that loose a bit but after graduation, with no other plans, I leaped at the opportunity to work for what was then one of the top newspapers in the country. Late that summer, I received the letter offering me the job at \$54 a week. I’d start a month later.

A family from the church had fortuitously made a recent move to Boston and invited me to stay with them until I could find a place of my own. I had babysat for the Bowersocks’ three children for a couple of years and liked them very much. Mr. Bowersock picked me up at Logan Airport after the long flight and drove me to their spacious suburban home in Lexington. My “room” was the living room couch, which was fine with me. I loved the New England ambience, the historic little town, and the genial family.

Other than the sheltered freedom I had experienced in college, this was my first time on my own, a daunting change under most any circumstances. My mother, a controlled and controlling woman, had passed on her anxiety to me. It seemed I was always trying to push the envelope in an effort to outrun it. The move to Boston was the most dramatic risk I had taken but, to my disappointment, I found the jitters had followed me across the country.

The Bowersocks found me a place to live, a small studio apartment right across from the Publishing Society where I would be working. It would be temporary housing; I'd have to find another option quickly. But it was quiet, neat and clean, the short walk convenient because my workday began at 6 A.M.

The first day, a pleasant woman gave me a chatty tour of the formidable, white marble building. The Christian Science Publishing Society was at its peak in revenue and outreach, fully staffed and busy. I expected the newsroom, our last stop, to be a beehive, just like in the movies. Guys would be yelling across the room at each other; there would be a supercharged buzz in the air. Instead it was more like a library, eerily hushed. I was shown to a cubicle where the three of us copykids would sit and wait for the ringing of a directory bell attached to a post at the entrance. Each time it abruptly fractured the silence, one of us would jump up and hurry to the summoning editor to pick up copy or run some errand. In addition, we delivered each of the four daily editions to the editors. The first papers off the press would go to the managing editor and the editorial board, housed in a glass-enclosed office, segregated from the rest of the newsroom. The rest of the papers were distributed alphabetically by the editor's last name. When it was time for the press run, I made it a point to move through the insulated double doors into the print room. When the printing presses started, the intense aroma of the inked newsprint and the deafening roar of the rapidly rolling drums sent my adrenaline into overdrive. I never got tired of that experience.

The other two copykids were older than I and were locals. Jennifer was more than a little detached and gave the impression she considered this role to be beneath her. She seldom spoke to either of us and was rarely in the cubicle. Steve was friendlier and had a goofy sense of humor.

When I delivered the papers, I'd chat up the editors, hoping to earn a chance at an actual writing assignment, remote as I knew that possibility would be. Steve and Jennifer had been there more than a year without being extended any kind of opportunity. I was told when I was hired that being a copykid would likely give me a chance to write but it would take a long time. I should be patient, not my most notable quality.

A few weeks into my tenure, I found an apartment with a roommate, a woman who also worked for the Society in a different department. I didn't meet her until the day I moved in. It was a small one-bedroom apartment on the fourth floor in the tree-shaded Fenway. Debbie seemed young, immature, and undereducated. Lacking any discernible conversational skill, her main interest was going out with her various boyfriends. Almost nightly, the buzzer from downstairs would ring and out she'd go.

As a result, I spent most of my nights alone. I had grown up in the suburbs and had never lived in a city. The apartment overlooked the courtyard, facing many other apartments. My mind wandered into "Rear Window" territory from time to time, while I observed people in various stages of undress doing things that would cause most of us to close the curtains.

Running my own life was both exciting but sometimes overwhelming, with all the new responsibilities. I had to feed myself, do laundry, pay bills and get to work on time. The latter was no small task, because the distance to work from The Fenway entailed a 25-minute walk, in the dark through deserted streets. I stopped each morning at a donut shop for "breakfast," including what I learned to call a "regular" cup of coffee, laden with cream and sugar. Coffee was frowned upon by Christian Scientists but I justified it due to the early hour. Once, I was followed by a group of men cruising me in an old beater. When the car slowed and pulled closer, one guy called out, "Hey, cutie. Do you know what time it is?" I didn't respond but quickened my walk, along with my pulse.

One way to tamp down my generalized anxiety was by learning how to navigate the city. Some days after work, I'd board the subway. Everywhere I turned in this new city seemed to release a new adventure. My first stop was Cambridge. While I was proud of having graduated from Cal, Harvard was an unreachable academic rung. I was curious.

I've always been able to sense the pulsating convergence of history wherever I am. I can imagine scenes, people, events that transpired years or even generations before. Walking around Cambridge, I could easily picture Presidents, Supreme Court Justices and other luminaries striding purposefully around the same Harvard Yard in which I had planted myself, agog at even being there. I explored other parts of the city, too, but none with the thrill of Harvard.

It was fall in New England and I was often moved to tears when the subway zoomed past the dazzling, multi-colored stands of trees. The intense emotional response surprised me and took me to an unfamiliar place in my head. Having grown up in Los Angeles, I had never seen nature quite like this, so reminiscent of Emerson's essays and Thoreau's life at Walden Pond.

Meanwhile in that other new terrain labeled work, I was called into the city editor's office. He knew I had majored in political science. In a thick Boston accent, he said that Justice William O. Douglas was scheduled to speak at a community center in Scituate. Would I like to cover it? Me? Interview a Supreme Court Justice? Wow. I had read many of his opinions in my Constitutional Law class and contemplated what I'd ask him. As I was pondering this, the editor mentioned the topic would be effluence, sewage treatment. Huh? Well, Okay. And, oh yeah. Did I have a way to get to Scituate?

I had been invited to the Bowersocks for dinner that night and mentioned my dilemma. Since there was no public transportation to Scituate, a beach community about an hour away, they said I could borrow their second car, a VW beetle. I was all set to go on my first professional newspaper assignment.

The small community hall was nearly filled when Douglas was introduced. After all these years, I can't remember what he said, but I did timidly ask a clarifying question about effluent, which still makes me laugh. I was disappointed I couldn't raise a topic of more interest, but then that wasn't my job.

Driving home that evening, the article came together in my head. I quietly closed the bedroom door so as not to awaken Debbie, set up the portable typewriter in the kitchen, and beat out the story. The next morning, I could hardly wait for the editor to get to his desk so I could turn it in. To my surprise, he liked it and ran it in the afternoon

edition without changes. It was exciting to see it, even though it was just a few inches and the byline read “By Staff.”

Having tasted success earlier than I had expected, I was impatient for more. I mistakenly thought that after I was published, other editors would be eager for me to write for them. My first stop was the sports department, a small office situated near the press room. I had long been a huge baseball fan and Boston was the home of the Red Sox, after all. The four male sportswriters were seated at their own small desks, clacking away at their typewriters, a teletype machine in the corner. I approached Ed, the sports editor, and asked if there was a chance I could cover some baseball games. I had no idea how outrageous this was until he and the others laughed. I felt my face flush.

“Sweetie, women don’t write about sports. Check with Dottie.”

Dottie was the editor for “Day”, aka, the women’s section. That was the last place I wanted to be. It was akin to being chained to a kitchen sink. I slunk out of the sports office and returned to the copykids’ cubicle, chided for my chutzpah.

With this road blocked, I began to question what it was I really wanted to do there. I didn’t know what was possible or, more to the point, impossible. Except for one rather snooty woman on the elite editorial board, all the journalists in that newsroom were men.

Along my newspaper delivery route, I had befriended a couple of the editors. Jim wrote about Latin America. Though I had a political science background, I knew nothing about that region and had no interest, but Jim was a comer. He looked to be in his 40s, already wizened. He had worked for many years in the newsroom at the St. Louis Post-Dispatch in the days when writers had flasks in their desks. Sadly, he was away on assignment most of the time so I didn’t get to see him much. Christian Scientists neither smoked nor drank and were not fond of other milder stimulants like coffee or tea, either. I watched Jim lug his big cup of java to his desk every morning and knew this was a person I wanted to know better. He told me *sotto voce* stories about the wild times in St. Louis and we shared laughs about how restrictive this newsroom and religion were. I wished he had been there more often.

The other editor I pursued was Fred, the arts editor. I had been a film and TV reviewer for both the high school and college newspapers so we had a natural kinship. Fred was quiet and soft-spoken, as introverted as I was. We'd chat briefly about movies and plays. No conversation went on for long in the newsroom. I had the impression management frowned on this and I didn't want to rattle any cages. Not yet, anyway.

A week or so after my story about Douglas came out, Fred assigned me to write a review of "Ireland on Parade," a traditional festive event held at Boston Garden. More than half of Boston seemed to be of Irish descent, so it was an important story. Fred gave me two tickets so I asked Steve, my copykid compatriot, if he wanted to go with me. We were not a romantic duo by any means, just casual friends. But we had spent time together, having gone to a Harvard football game together and he had taken me to a Neil Diamond concert. I had met his parents in Wellesley one Sunday afternoon for a picnic.

I took notes throughout the mediocre but spirited performance, aware the review needed to skew positive, lacking my customary snark, given the audience for which I was writing. As with the Douglas story, it came together in my head as Steve was driving me home. When I turned in the review the next morning, Fred declared this would be my first byline. Wow. I had been there just three weeks.

When I knew the first presses would start up for the local edition, I hurried to the noisy room to watch my first byline roll off the drums. It was thrilling. But when I subsequently read the review, someone on the copy desk had carelessly reversed a few of the clauses in the lede, making it nonsensical and difficult to read. I was disappointed and embarrassed. Now, when I'd tell someone about it, I had to preface it with an apology and an explanation.

Still seeking engagement, I read in the paper that Ted Kennedy's campaign was looking for volunteers. Kennedy had been sidelined in a near-fatal plane crash and was running for another term in the Senate, as expected. The man on the other end of the phone asked how I might be able to contribute. I told him I was a writer for the Monitor and would be happy to work on a newsletter. He said we should discuss it over dinner. Jack was tall, dark and slick, far more sophisticated than anyone I had ever dated. I knew right off where he expected this to go. I warded him off that evening and informed

him we'd best do business on the phone. Though it wasn't my first experience with lechery, I wondered if it would be possible to have a working relationship with a man without a quid pro quo. I did write a story or two but never got to meet Kennedy.

By now, I was well into the second month of my tenure in Boston. I still wandered every weekend and contemplated how I might get to a Red Sox game just across the Charles River. The season was drawing to a close. If I turned off the TV at night, I could hear the noise of the crowds. I was getting bored with Steve. We had little in common and had apparently exhausted his conversational repertoire. I didn't want to take the relationship any further and I thought perhaps he did.

After the Boston Garden review was published, Fred asked if I would like to go for a drive the following Sunday. I had told him I wanted to see Hyannis and the Kennedy Compound. We headed off in the morning rain and parked as close as we could get. There was a children's playground just off the stately compound on the beach. We walked around almost in silence. There was a reverence to this place so dominated by tragedy and history. After lunch, Fred said he wanted to stop off at his place to pick something up for the coming week's work.

I wasn't attracted to Fred, though I enjoyed his company. I also knew he was married and that his wife was out of town. He was easily twice my age. When we got to his apartment, he turned to me and said,

"Aren't you worried I'll try to seduce you?"

Fred was such an asexual, neuter guy, I almost laughed. An unlikely candidate, I thought, and no threat. I wanted to be kind.

"I know you wouldn't do that," I responded.

"Why do you say that?" He looked hurt.

"Because you're a better man than that. You're married and a good Christian Scientist." I didn't know how Mrs. Eddy felt about adultery, since she had been married three times herself, but I figured this might be a tactful way out of a potentially uncomfortable situation. After that afternoon, he didn't ask to spend time with me again.

Back in the newsroom, I approached Mel, the book reviewer. He agreed to let me have a go and handed me a book about John Howard Lawson, a Hollywood writer who had been blacklisted during the McCarthy Era. I hadn't written a book review since high

school English classes, but I was eager to try anything to get experience. It was a ponderous work, a real slog, at least for me. I wrote the review and waited as several days passed. When Mel called me into his office, he had the review in front of him.

“I’m afraid this can’t go. You’ve missed the whole point.”

I was confused and embarrassed. How could that happen? I waited for him to continue.

“Sorry. Just can’t use it.”

“Okay. Can you tell me more? What can I do to make it better? What did I do wrong?”

“You just don’t understand what you’re writing about.”

He turned away without further elaboration. I was too flummoxed to pursue it. I felt shamed, like I had failed but I didn’t know why. Where had I missed “the point” and what was it? I walked away, knowing I’d never get another chance with him. It was a major disappointment. Given my years as a film and TV reviewer for the college newspaper, I thought I’d be good at this. Reviewing would certainly have been a more exciting option than covering basic news stores, with a byline as a bonus. Now what?

I was still doing the Christian Science thing, going to church every Sunday and often to the Wednesday night testimonial meetings. The Mother Church was adjacent to the Publishing Society, a stunning architectural gem erected when the founder, Mary Baker Eddy, reigned over the kingdom. It was easy to get lost in that magnificent, cavernous sanctuary and I seldom saw anyone I knew. The Bowersocks had me over to dinner now and again but I hardly ever saw Debbie. I was trying so hard to fit in somewhere, with a church I found less than satisfying, with a job that was moving too slowly for my expectations, and even with a roommate with whom I had nothing in common. So much of my life had been gleaned from the movies and books, with all the juxtaposed cliches that would guarantee success. I was starting to question those rules and wondered if it might be possible to navigate a life outside them.

By now, I was into my third month and getting restless. I started picking up a can of beer at the local market on the way home to accompany my frozen dinner, and feeling increasingly out of synch with religious demands. I had hoped to find another

iconoclast, someone with whom I could share my frustrations and observations, but there had been a dearth of significant interactions. I had questioned the Christian Science religion for several years prior to coming to Boston; these misgivings weren't new. I had long ago strayed from its prohibitions, even while continuing to associate myself with its overall comforting themes.

My experiences while at Cal had been intellectually and socially challenging, and I expected the course of my life would continue along that path. In Boston, though, I was frustrated by my inability to connect anywhere and contemplated resigning from the church. Its simplistic approach to solving problems no longer fit the unsettled person I was becoming.

During several weeks of contemplation, I corresponded with a close friend, an ex-boyfriend—and even with my mother. Her unhelpful, unsolicited advice was to “try and get along.” That wasn't the issue. I liked these people and I thought they liked me. This just wasn't a good fit. I wasn't managing either the complexity of my situation or my anxiety about it.

I made a life-changing decision and submitted my resignation letter to the clerk of the church. I made it clear in my note that I wasn't quitting my job at the Monitor, just the church. I hoped I would be able to slog through the pedestrian assignments and over time find a more creative role there. A few days later, I was called into the clerk's office in the Publishing Society building. He looked grandfatherly, like a Norman Rockwell painting, perched behind an oversized desk likely constructed the same year he was born.

“Is it true you're resigning from the church?”

“Yes, it is.”

“I can't believe this, young lady. May I ask why? Are you doing this of your own free will?”

I thought that was an odd question.

“I'm finding I have some major disagreements with some of the church's principles. And, yes, I made this decision myself.”

“You're up-and-coming on the paper, I'm told. You know that, don't you?”

I was feeling nervous, sensing a stern lecture might be imminent. My mind flashed back to being sent to the principal's office in the fourth grade for shoving a classmate.

"You're being very foolish. This has never happened. Do you understand that we require that all our employees be Christian Scientists?"

I hadn't known that, and was genuinely shocked, as much by his patronizing words as by my naivete. The civil libertarian in me was immediately offended. The clerk paused, as if trying to figure out how to solve this unprecedented conundrum. It hadn't occurred to me that my belief system (or lack of one) would affect my success as a writer. I assumed the only demand was that I be good.

"Well." He pushed his chair back. "I'm going to meet with Mr. Canham and we'll see what will be done."

I had met legendary editor Erwin D. Canham only briefly the first day on the job. After that, I had seen him once or twice in the hall. So they were going to talk to each other to decide what to do with me, huh? I was beginning to feel like a problem child. A rebellious one.

By the time Canham summoned me late the next day, I was boiling. By then, I knew I would leave the newspaper, regardless of his decision. It seemed to me that the church had imperiously tied those two institutions together, leaving me with little choice. I was in high dudgeon, insulted without understanding all the reasons for it. How dare he? How dare they? What possible difference could it make if I were a church member if I'm a good writer? Was this even legal? The unfairness of it rankled my youthful idealism. I knew I needed to make this decision myself, without waiting for this apparently troublesome verdict to be rendered. I had to make it okay with myself somehow. I walked into his enclosed office and sat down, trembling slightly. This man was a journalistic legend, after all, one about whom I had read in my journalism classes. I never imagined I'd be saying these words to him.

"Mr. Canham, I'm here to resign."

"I understand, Pam, but I wish you'd reconsider. You're a talented writer. You could have a career here. You're off to such a good start."

“Thanks for saying that. To be honest, Mr. Canham, the religious dues are too high. It’s not about the paper. I very much appreciate the opportunities I’ve had here.” He stood, shook my hand, smiled and wished me well.

I walked out of his office, feeling simultaneously triumphant and defeated. I knew I had blown perhaps my only opportunity to write for a major newspaper, something I thought I wanted. At the same time, it was the first time I had stood up for myself on principle but it wouldn’t be the last. It took several more abbreviated jobs over the next few years before I figured out who I was and what mattered. It wasn’t lost on me that this crisis had been controlled and manipulated by men, either. Such was the way of the world, it seemed. This was only one of the simmering issues inside my brain that would take years to ferment into who I became. Finding the right professional fit for this iconoclast would prove to be a lengthy search, consuming much of the next decade.

The four months in Boston were dense and eventful, a bumpy ride on a steep learning curve. It seemed I was on a path toward journalistic success but I tripped over my own scruples. Confusion, loneliness and impatience likely informed my decision to leave but what I found was much more central to my identity than my occupational choice. Among other insights, I realized I wasn’t comfortable with formal religion or dogma of any kind. I knew it was essential to develop ways to transcend a male-dominated society somehow. While I learned that life as a newspaper writer wasn’t what I wanted, I had no idea of what would come next. At the time, there was no way to understand that those four months would be merely a rough draft of my emerging identity. Most importantly, I discovered that listening to my inner voice would always have to transcend the external trappings of success. It was a lot to digest at twenty-one.



**Pam Munter** has authored several books including *When Teens Were Keen: Freddie Stewart and The Teen Agers of Monogram*, *Almost Famous*, and *As Alone As I Want To Be*. She’s a former clinical psychologist, performer, and film historian. Her essays, book reviews, and short stories have appeared in more than 150 publications. Her play, “Life Without” was nominated for Outstanding Original Writing by the Desert Theatre League and she has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. Pam has an MFA in Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts, her sixth

college degree. *Fading Fame: Women of a Certain Age in Hollywood* is scheduled for publication in early 2021.