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Writing for Sheila

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English

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Abstract: This thesis is a personal memoir of the ten years I spent working as a television journalist in both military and commercial TV stations. Through a chronological retelling of my past experiences, the book not only uncovers the behind the scenes reality of a largely misunderstood business, but also unveils some of the unethical, immoral and surprising practices of broadcast news stations and newsrooms. The memoir is particularly concerned with my awakening as a journalist, and how I came to understand and appreciate an imaginary woman named “Sheila.” During much of my tenure as a TV journalist, I was instructed to write for an ideal viewer who was supposedly an uneducated, uninformed, middle-aged, white mother. I was encouraged to feed “Sheila” shallow news content about things she could easily comprehend, instead of challenging her to think for herself by simply reporting newsworthy and relevant facts. My book focuses on “Sheila” and how her metaphorical presence in my life helped shape both the content of the news I generated, as well as my own life choices. I will also reflect on how my new role as a mother and a graduate student helped me come to the realization that the “Sheilas” of the world are much more smart, capable and worthy than journalists are giving her credit for.
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Writing for Sheila – Introduction

When people find out I used to be a television reporter, they’re always much more impressed than is necessary. “Wow, you were on TV?” they ask me, and then immediately want to know why on earth I would ever leave such a fabulous career. I usually blush a little, and then try to gently explain to them that not everything is always exactly as it seems. By the time we get to the part of the conversation where I tell them that I’m now a full-time mother and a part-time English teacher and graduate student, they’ve usually grown bored and moved on to another topic.

I don’t blame them. My new is life is kind of boring. For starters, I am currently much more informed about the remedies for curing diaper rash than I am about the state of our economy or current politics. Instead of hustling around town chasing ambulances and searching for solid sound bites, I spend my time hustling diapers, chasing a crawling baby around, and celebrating solid poops. It’s not glamorous by any means, but I am happy.

I left the television news business almost two years ago, and only in the past few months have I finally regained the anonymity I craved while I was working in the public eye. It’s now rare for strangers to squint their eyes suspiciously at me, asking, “Why do you look so familiar?” My paychecks are miniscule, my best friend is a babbling, drooling baby boy (my son), and I often don’t shower until past 2:00 p.m., if at all. But I love my new life, and I wouldn’t trade it for anything. That being said, I do have some regrets about my past.

Early in my career, I was introduced to a woman named Sheila. She wasn’t a real person though, at least not in the physical sense. Sheila was a fabricated identity created
by a marketing department tasked with increasing our TV viewership. Essentially, she was the “ideal” television viewer. I used to talk to Sheila every night. Our one-sided conversations usually involved three-alarm fires and deadly car crashes, at least on a good day. And if the day was mundane, we often talked about the weather. Sheila and I were friends, but there were strings attached. The rule was: I spoke and she listened.

“The experts,” a group of big-wig TV consultants, told us we should get close to Sheila, and so we tried our hardest to reach out to her. They painted a picture of a sad and homely woman in her late thirties, one who looked much older due to all the years she went without applying sunscreen. Her hair was dirty brown, cut in some out-of-date, 1980’s feather-style, with tiny gray roots peeking out like a bad edge trimming on a summer lawn. They told us she was overweight, but not to judge her for it, because she was much too ignorant to know about the effect that sugars and fats had on her body. They explained how we might often see Sheila out shopping at Walmart, buying toys with lead-based paint for her children, or perhaps exposing the world to Swine Flu by forgetting to cough into her sleeve. Her family life was typical. She and her husband had three children: one grossly obese preschooler, an elementary-aged student who had been Left Behind by George Bush’s education policy, and a pregnant, suicidal, drug addict teenager. The consultants said Sheila’s only chance at survival was to turn on the evening news and learn a thing or two about how to survive in this crazy world. Our job was to keep this woman interested, ignorant, and most importantly, glued to our newscasts.

“Sheila” is the woman I spoke to each night as I stared into a TV teleprompter.

“From now on, your target audience is a 30 to 40-year-old female with a fourth grade level of understanding. Talk to her. She’s the one who makes or breaks our
ratings,” said the TV consultant, a pompous ass with hair so crunchy and styled I’d be afraid to light a match near it.

I remember asking him why green energy products and environmental breakthroughs were number ten on his expert list of Sheila’s priorities, falling far below pop culture, crime, the economy, and education.

“Because Sheila doesn’t care about the environment,” said Mr. Consultant.

But while the consultants were convinced that Sheila was an ignorant fool, I always wished that she were just a little bit deeper and smarter than they made her out to be. I hated to think that my hard work gathering stories each day was being wasted on a gullible, idiotic, earth killer. And even if Sheila wasn’t the next Einstein, it still seemed counterproductive to me to dumb things down for our audience. Why not challenge her? Why not teach her to care about the same things we cared about? Sadly, I knew that the only thing the consultants were concerned with was making money. By catering to Sheila, we as journalists were giving in to everything that is wrong with “journalism” of today.

Television news as we once knew it just doesn’t exist anymore. What used to be an elite, cutthroat world of well-respected newsmen and women, is now a group of disgruntled, underpaid, celebrity wannabes. It’s no longer about getting to the bottom of a story and exposing the wrongs of the world, but instead it’s about earning the best rating for each newscast, no matter what it takes. News directors hire cheap labor to do the job: recent college graduates who are willing to work like dogs for tiny paychecks. We’re expected to walk into the newsroom in the morning, completely clueless about our story for the day, and walk out in the evening as though we are experts on the subject. Because
budgets are tight, there is no time to dig deep and do in-depth research and interviews.
Instead, we have to slap together a story as quickly as possible and hope that the viewers
have a positive response. How can anyone be an expert on something after just one day?
No matter though, because it’s all about good ratings. The better the ratings, the more the
corporate vampires can charge for advertising. And because broadcast journalists are
always writing with Sheila in mind, many of the commercials aired during newscasts are
for things they think she needs: pills to fight off menopause, diet milkshakes, robotic
vacuum cleaners, and leopard-print Snuggies for all her evenings spent lounging on the
couch watching the news.

And the disservice TV journalists do to themselves is nearly as appalling as the
one they do to Sheila. From the beginning, aspiring journalists are told that in the
broadcast business, you must ‘pay your dues.’ We believe this lie whole-heartedly. So we
go to college, work hard, struggle through internships, and dream of moving to Chicago
or Manhattan to work for a big national network. When we graduate, we throw away
entire portions of our lives, leave lovers, friends, and our families, and move away to
tiny, Podunk towns in order to work brutally long hours for practically nothing. We do
all of this in hopes of one day finally ‘making it.’

My first real TV job was working at an NBC news affiliate station in Rapid City,
South Dakota, where I was paid in neither sunshine nor lifestyle. Instead, I made the
comical wage of just $8.10 an hour. Every day, I lugged around 75-plus pounds of
camera equipment, all of which was painfully out of date. While much of the television
broadcasting world was upgrading to High Definition (HD) television, we were still using
brick-sized Beta tapes. I often found myself wading ankle-deep through fields of buffalo
dung in order to get that perfect shot of the fender bender car accident that somehow topped our evening newscast.

“If it bleeds, it leads,” my boss would remind me.

I just assumed that after all the sacrifices I was making for my career, one day it would all pay off. It wasn’t about finding fame or fortune for me, but a newsroom that “fit right,” a place I could see myself sticking around for a while. I dreamed of landing a job that made me feel good everyday—not because of a big paycheck or special perks—but because I was doing stories that mattered and made a difference in the day to day lives of regular people. It seemed only natural that if I worked hard enough, that day would eventually come. But it never did.

After leaving South Dakota, I moved on to work for KOLO-TV, an ABC affiliate in Reno, Nevada. It seemed like a dream job, although the reality was, the meager $28,000 per year salary they offered me was only good in comparison to what I had been making. And after five years at KOLO, not much had changed. I was still ‘paying my dues.’ If I had known what I was getting into when I graduated college, I might have taken a more conventional path and become a nurse, a firefighter, a teacher, or something a little more practical. Instead, I plugged away miserably each day, spinning my wheels to nowhere. The longer I stayed in the business, the more certain I was that I would never be finished paying my dues. At close to thirty years old, I made less money than some carnies do. I discovered this one summer at the Nevada State Fair while I was doing a story about the economy’s effect on temporary jobs. When the former prison inmate turned carnival worker told me how much money he made, I just about choked on my microphone.
“Twenty bucks an hour,” he said, “plus overtime.”

What did I get a college degree for? I thought if I really put myself out there, made connections, took risks, and got plenty of valuable TV experience, one day, I could be the next Katie Couric. Instead, I was paid less than a Ferris wheel operator.

When I started, I imagined myself becoming a serious journalist who uncovered injustices and exposed wrongdoings, like the forefathers of the TV world: Walter Cronkite, Edward Murrow, Tom Brokaw; but instead, I spent five long years of my life exploiting people, lying to them, and talking to them like they were fourth graders. After a few years in the business, I even began to lose my conscience. The hiss of police scanner traffic became music to my ears.

“Code 50,” the dispatcher would purr, meaning someone was dead.

My fellow reporters and I would barely flinch at this, and we’d secretly hope it was a body floating in the Truckee River, a chance for a good story to put on our resume. Chasing ambulances became second nature. When one passed, it was as though an imaginary string automatically pulled our heads in the direction it was traveling.

“Come on, please be breaking news,” we’d beg as we watched the white van speed by.

Plane crash? Earthquake? Flood? Cat stuck in a tree? I can’t count how many times I wished for tragedy, crossed my fingers for a disaster, hoping that something, anything would put a quick end to a slow news day.

I often wonder what it was that made me pursue journalism as a career so strongly in the first place. Maybe it’s because from the outside looking in, it seems like the perfect job. In what other career does a person get to feel important everywhere they go?
The perks of being a television journalist sound really great on paper. It was hard to imagine life without a front row seat, a free pass or an inside look at nearly everything I encountered.

Aside from the fringe benefits, I assumed that once I got my foot in the door of success, I could change the world. I believed journalists were responsible for standing up for citizens who otherwise wouldn’t have a voice. I credited them with informing the public about things that might have otherwise gone unnoticed; scams, trends, crime patterns, and crooked politicians. I wanted to be a part of this professional group of people who I held up high on a pedestal. Once I got it into my mind that I wanted a career in journalism, I refused to let anything stop me from reaching that goal.

But after covering the same stories over and over again year after year, it all got tiring. Perks and heroic acts aside, I eventually began to question the ethics of my career. On a typical day, I would find myself ringing the doorbell of a suspected sex offender or child predator, or maybe telephoning a woman whose husband was just murdered, even though his body was not yet cold. I did these things selfishly, in hopes of getting the best sound bite: the teary-eyed widow crying for her lover, the angry pervert putting his hand in front of the lens. These images are good for TV.

Other times, I was forced to deal with people on their very worst behavior. When a politician had an affair, I got to ask him why he betrayed his wife and the people who trusted him and gave him their vote. When a company let go of hundreds of hardworking employees with families to feed, I was expected to expose their wrongdoings, and exploit company’s CEO as a money-hungry bastard. And when local drunks got their fifth or sixth DUI, I got to splash their pictures all over the news and ruin their lives, as if being
an addict with a criminal record wasn’t bad enough. I was told to ask tough questions about sensitive subjects that most people wouldn’t touch with a ten-foot pole. And when there wasn’t enough time to do the research required for a deep, meaningful story, I was advised to make the best out of my limited resources by throwing together a mediocre news package that was sexy or edgy enough to draw in the masses.

Despite my displeasure while working as a journalist, it took me years to work up the courage to quit. Our country’s severe economic recession forced me to stick it out much longer than I wanted to. For obvious reasons, I was afraid of the unknown. But there were many other reasons I stuck with it, reasons that had nothing to do with finances. Sheila was one of those reasons. Even though I can admit to having fed shallow news stories to Sheila for years, there did come a time when I felt like I began to understand Sheila and empathize with her. While I knew that deep down, Sheila was nothing more than a figment of the wild imaginations of a very out of touch marketing department, she became very real to me in some ways. Eventually, she became the reason I went to work each day. Every story I did, I did with her in mind. Despite what the consultants told me about Sheila’s shallow interests, I felt like I had to fight for her. The consultants were convinced that Sheila wasn’t interested in things like the environment, local food culture and the arts, so I figured I would have to be the one to help guide her in the right direction. She was a captive audience, and I was determined to help her. But even with my newly found purpose, I still felt like I couldn’t continue working in an industry that was so fiscally motivated and tainted with fabrication. On top of that, my personal life was calling. I wanted a baby, more free time, and holidays off to spend with my husband and family. So I made the very tough decision to quit.
And when quitting time came, my anger, distrust and frustration with the journalism industry as a whole had gotten the best of me. For some reason, I felt an overwhelming desire to go out with a bang. I guess I just thought that if I couldn’t make a positive difference working as a journalist, then maybe I could at least leave behind a legacy. I fantasized about my what my last day on the job might be like. If I couldn’t make it to the top, I might as well hit rock bottom. I imagined myself standing in front of the twinkling, faux night sky on our station’s set, perfectly poised in a sharp blazer and slacks.

“Stand by! And three, two—”

Silence, as the floor manager pointed two fingers in my direction, my cue to speak. But instead of reading off the teleprompter, ingesting and then spitting out the white capital letters as they spun by in a blur, I would say what I had been holding back all along.

“Good evening. I hate you both, and I hate this job.” I’d say to the suit-clad anchor team, with a huge, corny wink.

“Your fake-nice personality acts aren’t fooling anyone. Both of you are overpaid, under qualified, and completely self-serving. When was the last time you actually left the building and gathered a news story? Do you have any clue what’s going on in our community? Do you even care about your viewers? There is a woman out there named Sheila, and she’s giving you her undivided attention each night, and yet you continue to fill your newscasts with garbage. Stop wasting her time and sensationalizing the newscast with your far-fetched fantasies!”
One more wink for effect here. I imagined walking away, leaving the building, getting into my car, and never looking back. It would have been so liberating! I’m sure my outburst would have made the front page of the local newspaper, which proves another point about the gossip-filled uselessness of most journalism today.

If Sheila had happened to catch my last newscast, I hoped it would make her day. I liked to picture her as so much smarter than the baby-making, bon-bon chomping, Oprah-watching, imbecile the consultants reduced her down to. In my head, I created a new version of Sheila, a woman who didn’t need a newscast to remind her to use protection from UV rays, avoid saturated fats, and prevent the spread of infectious diseases. This version of Sheila would have been just fine without us.

I imagined her in stretched out on a yoga mat in the Downward Dog position, an ivy-league college T-shirt covering her muscular, fit body. She’d crack up at my TV bitch-fest.

“Oh wow,” she’d say with a grin. “She really told those idiots.”

As she moved into a Half Moon pose, Sheila would laugh out loud once more, her foot kicking a copy of *The New Yorker* off her coffee table. Then she’d grab her remote, push the off button, and head outside to build a solar panel.

*Okay,* so maybe my vision of Sheila was a bit far-fetched. The truth was, the consultants were probably partially right about Sheila, or rather, the prototype of our quintessential target audience. But even if Sheila was uneducated, uninformed and unhealthy, and even if her children weren’t gifted or athletic—so what? None of these factors excluded her from the need to be clued in on what is happening in the world around her. But for me, imagining Sheila as a smart and capable woman made my job
just a little more bearable during my last few months of working as a journalist. If she were really as smart as I wanted her to be, I probably never would have quit. But since I knew deep down that this intelligent, worldly, yogi mama wasn’t actually watching my newscasts, I gave up trying to reach her. I quit broadcast news because it felt to me like a lost cause.

In the end, it was the consultant’s version of Sheila—the shallow, simple-minded homemaker—who eventually helped give me the courage to leave television, go back to graduate school, and become a mother. It took several years, hundreds of stories, and a lot of soul-searching for me to finally understand the immense disservice I was doing to all the Sheilas of the world. By dumbing our newscast content down to target a supposedly uneducated and apathetic audience, we were not only holding Sheila back from her highest potential, but we were also alienating a group of viewers who were likely far too smart to fall for our fancy little tricks. And only once I had quit did I finally realize that no matter how much it might feel strange to admit it, we all have a little Sheila in us.

This is my story. It’s a true tale of an aspiring writer who thought that becoming a broadcast journalist would be a prestigious and rewarding experience, but who found out the hard way just how dysfunctional modern journalism really is. But before I begin, I’d like to make an apology. I am truly sorry, Sheila. I am sorry for doubting you all these years. If I had understood you better, I never would have listened to my producers who told me to manipulate and mold you. If I had taken the time to get to know you, I would have realized a long time ago that despite our differences in upbringing, you and I actually have a lot in common. My behavior was unforgiveable on some levels, but
maybe my history will help to explain why I behaved the way I did. This story is for you, Sheila, whoever and wherever you may be.
Let me start at the beginning. As a child, I always loved telling stories. If something funny happened, I was overjoyed with the prospect of retelling the event to a captive audience, throwing in sound effects and exaggerating where necessary for effect. If someone else was telling a story about something I also witnessed, I usually interjected and told it my way.

“No, no you’re not telling it right!” I’d interrupt. “This is what really happened.”

Next to talking, writing was my favorite pastime. I kept journals from the moment I could write coherent sentences. I’d fill my journals with what I imagined were deep, profound thoughts about my own identity and observations of those around me. *Harriet the Spy* was one of my favorite books, a story about a young girl who chronicled the lives of her classmates and colleagues in a small journal. I wanted to be just like Harriet. My own family gatherings were also a chance for me to put my writing and performance skills to the test. I’d write and read catchy, holiday-themed rhymes at the dinner table just as my family was sitting down to eat, pausing and inflecting in all the right places.

While I loved being the center of attention, writing was my true passion. I always knew that one day I would be a writer. I imagined myself becoming a famous children’s author like Maurice Sendak or Judy Blume, spending my weekends signing books at the local bookstore. Long lines of mothers with their children would form, each of them wanting a personalized signature in their book jacket. “We loooove your books!” they would rave.
But somewhere along the way, telling true stories became my object of desire. In elementary school, I became obsessed with reading autobiographies and non-fiction, life stories about Harriet Tubman, Princess Diana, and Amelia Earhart. I hated fantasy and fiction, but I loved facts. That’s when I realized journalism just might be the perfect career for me.

I landed my first newspaper job at age five with a small, start-up company in suburban Northern California with just two employees, myself and my big sister, Amber. We distributed our papers to just four houses on Vista Avenue in the wine country of Napa Valley. The goal was to uncover the scandals on our tiny street, giving in-depth accounts of neighborhood gossip, like why the old lady who lived in the woodsy house on the corner never came outside or raised her blinds. We thrilled our neighbors with all of the elements a good newspaper should: funny pages, complete with stick figure illustrations and comics; horoscopes that made sure our birth months, August and December, had happy predictions; and even obituaries, which unveiled devastating accounts of neighborhood cats who’d seen their final days. As the aspiring writer in our family, I called most of the shots; my older sister followed my lead. Just like our real papery delivery boy, we distributed our papers by hand, shoving each folded up copy shoved straight into our neighbors’ mailboxes—an honest practice—but one that ended up leading to our paper’s demise.

Aurora, the crazy old frazzle-haired lady who lived in the mint chip-colored house two doors down, eventually ratted us out to our mom, accusing my sister and me of tampering with federal property. She told our mother she didn’t want our grubby little
hands inside her mailbox, regardless of what kind of neighborly service we were trying to provide.

“Girls, I know it seems silly, but you should probably stop opening the neighbor’s mailboxes to deliver your paper. Aurora is upset,” said our mom one afternoon, trying to hold back a smirk.

Mom had previously informed us that Aurora had paintings on her wall created by her collection of worms, their wriggling bodies leaving behind a road map of rainbow colors, the infinite lines only ending when the worms dropped off the edge of the canvas like factory chocolates on a conveyer belt. Amber and I figured we shouldn’t have to listen to anyone strange enough to do worm art for a hobby, but nevertheless, our little newspaper finally had to come to an end.

My next attempt at journalism didn’t come until nearly fifteen years later. It happened at a peculiar moment in American history, just as those two infamous airplanes crashed into the World Trade Center, shocking the country into extreme patriotism and giving news writers across the world at least a decade of fresh material. It was a day when even the most seasoned journalists didn’t know quite what to say.

“This is a perfect example of shaky video,” said the drill sergeant. “Remember to always use a tripod if one’s available, otherwise you’ll end up with this mess. See, look, even big networks like CNN make mist—” his voiced dropped off as he looked up at the television screen again, but this time in silence. His mouth dropped open wide as he took it all in: the burning buildings, the threatening cloud of thick, grey smoke, a flustered newscaster trying to remember her lines.
“Um, hold on a second, everyone. I think this is serious. Let’s um, just sit here for a minute and watch this,” he stammered.

For the next hour, we sat silently in our broadcast newsgathering class as the drama of 9/11 unfolded. I remember thinking it was just my luck to join the military after more than a decade of peacetime, only to have a major terrorist event take place less than a year after I volunteered for service. I was nine months into US NAVY enlistment and already beginning to wish I could take back my oath. I had joined as a Navy photographer because there was a waiting list for journalism school, but after I had completed a humiliating stint at boot camp and then spent a month or so trying to wrap my brain around F-stops and shutter speeds, I found an open slot in the journalism course and switched over. It was exactly where I wanted to be, given that my whole reason for joining the military was so I could travel the world and write about it. Everyone had always told me that if I wanted to be a writer, I had to get some life experience so I would actually have a decent story to tell. So I did the most unexpected thing imaginable: I enlisted. And there I was, eagerly attending the Defense Information School (DINFOS) in Fort Meade, Maryland, sitting alongside Marines, Soldiers, Airmen and Coast Guard, a grab bag mix of military men and women from all over the country, the only thing uniting us: our desire to write.

“Attention. Due to the recent events in New York City and at the Pentagon, the base is now on lock down,” we heard over the loudspeaker. Our sergeant excused us for the day and told us to disregard what he’d said about shaky video. He said in breaking news situations like this one, anything goes.
We spent the next three days stuck on the Army base, nothing to do but stay glued to the television and stand in ranks while the petty officers in charge called roll over and over again, making sure each of us was accounted for. I thought it was silly, considering there was no way we could have escaped unnoticed while wearing our tell-tale blue dungarees, our last names printed squarely on our rear-ends. It was just like I imagined prison would be, only with fewer tattoos. Plus, coming or going from base meant being greeted by a miniature army of sniffing dogs, a pile of paperwork, and—I imagined—a full-body cavity search.

The base population, the surrounding community, and the world were horrified by what happened on September 11th. Wall-to-wall news coverage on TV, radio and the Internet kept us informed, but none of us really knew quite how to react. Given how close Fort Meade was to Washington D.C. and the Pentagon, we all wondered if our base would be targeted next. It was terrifying. And what about our families? If the World Trade Center could topple in a matter of minutes, what about the bridges, buildings and monuments in our own hometowns? It was a dark period in American history, so we did what we could to stay positive.

“Smoke ‘em if you got ‘em,” my division leader would yell out each morning after our daily roll-call. The base commander cancelled classes for the week, so the maintenance petty officer decided our barracks needed a really deep cleaning. The smokers increased their daily intake of nicotine—cigarette breaks the only relief from the monotony of scrubbing the toilets and buffing the hallways—and those who didn’t smoke, started.
I felt hopeless, afraid, stuck—and selfishly—entitled to something better. After all, I was the one who had volunteered for this. So why couldn’t I just quit too? I had dropped out of school at the end of my freshman year of college at California State University Long Beach, mostly because I had spent my first two semesters daydreaming about moving to a tropical island where I could lie on the beach and write novels while I sipped piña coladas. I joined the Navy because I had goals in life, but I wasn’t quite sure how to reach them. I had always known I wanted to write, but I needed experience. I desperately longed to travel, but I needed money to do so. Somehow during my first year at college, I had lost my way.

I spent the entire summer of 2000 contemplating my next move. There was no way I was going back to school in Long Beach, so I began researching nearly every option available: volunteering, becoming a nanny in Manhattan, teaching overseas, working on a cruise ship, even serving cocktails at a Club Med. I wanted adventure, but I wasn’t actually qualified for any of these jobs. I had no money to front the plane ticket to Africa for a volunteer program, the Peace Corps wouldn’t take me without a college degree, and my parents weren’t going to give me another dime unless I stayed in school.

One day that August, I saw an Armed Forces recruiting commercial on the Internet and decided the military might be my only option. I still don’t know what it was about the cheesy slow motion hand salutes, the American flags waving lethargically to patriotic melodies, and the shiny trumpets being held by white-gloved hands that reeled me in, but an hour later, I was standing outside a recruitment office at a strip mall in the blistering Napa Valley heat, wondering if I should go in. Once inside, there were three more doors to choose from: Army, Marines, and Navy, each door with a corresponding
uniform hanging above it. Looking up at the crisp, white Navy uniform hanging on the wall, a shiny anchor adorning each collar, I decided the sailor outfits were the least threatening of the three, and therefore, that was the service I would join. It seemed simple enough, but I had no clue what I was about to get myself into.

Just over a year later, I found myself locked down on an east coast military base with no choice but to follow through with my commitment. If I had had the choice to quit that day, to walk away from the military, leaving behind the tragedy of 9/11 and suffering no consequences, I probably would have. When I visited the Navy recruiter the summer prior, America was in peacetime. No bombs were flying, no wars were looming, and the U.S. military was something many people turned to in order to get money for college or a fresh start in a far-away place. I personally had signed up in hopes of getting a chance to travel, with absolutely no intention of being involved in a war. I grew up in a family of liberal, ex-hippies who spoke out strongly against violence as a means of problem-solving. After September 11th, war opposers began organizing rallies to call for an end to the violence. While my mom and stepfather were spending their Saturday afternoons walking in peace marches in San Francisco, I was on the other side of the country trying to play the role of patriotic military member, when all I really wanted to do was write.

“We’ll be able to leave the base in a few days, but for now, just hang tight,” our base commander assured us.

Within a week, things slowly began to return to normal, whatever that was. The feeling of safety and security had vanished for most Americans, and an increase in red, white and blue flags decorated the porches of citizens who had never before given a second thought to patriotism. Terrorists had attacked us, and suddenly everyone seemed
reluctantly aware of America’s place in the world’s pecking order. We no longer felt as powerful and invincible as we once had. But instead of living in fear, I focused on my future as a writer. One year into my enlistment and I already felt like I had enough new experience to fill an entire book.

I spent my days in school, learning the basics of military journalism: the inverted pyramid of news writing, how to deal with interview subjects who give one-word answers, and what to do if Al Qaeda took over our radio station. By the time I graduated from DINFOS in October of 2001, I had completed courses on every type of reporting that existed at that time: from television and radio, to newspapers and public relations. The military could send me anywhere, and the hope was, I could perform.

The Navy job detailers gave each of us a “dream sheet” where we could write down our top choices for assignments. I laughed while I filled it out, knowing that the word “dream” was code for “not a chance in hell.” Out of six choices available, I penciled them in according to desire: My first choice was the tiny island of Diego Garcia, followed by Italy, Greece, San Diego, Guantanamo Bay, and finally, as a last resort, Japan. A week later, I received orders to Misawa Air Force Base in Japan, my final, desperate choice. All I had ever heard about Northern Japan was that it was cold; really, really cold. What I didn’t know is that Sheila lived there too.
There are times when television news trumps all other formats; times when seeing a real-time, full-screen, live version of an event or tragedy is difficult to top. On election night, there is something about the nostalgic act of watching live return numbers roll in that has become a part of American heritage. During a snowstorm or a wildfire, an earthquake or a hurricane, there’s something both exciting and terrifying about watching live television coverage. Perhaps it helps feed America’s morbid fixation on death and destruction. September 11th was one of those times.

In the hours, days and weeks after 9/11, the picture of those two planes crashing into the World Trade Center was re-broadcasted and re-printed so many times that the image was burned into the hearts and minds of most Americans for life. News coverage became so oversaturated with new and enterprising ways to cover 9/11, that eventually, the depth and breadth of the tragedy began to feel cheapened. Anytime a person is exposed to something frightening or shocking over and over and over again, there often comes a point when it no longer surprises them. They become immune. For me, this is how it was with 9/11. After viewing the plane crash for the hundredth or so time, it became mundane and bland, like a stale piece of bread. In the two months that passed between 9/11 and when I arrived in Japan, the worldwide hysteria concerning the attack had died down a bit—and for me—had been almost completely wiped away. I stopped pining over the victims who died that day, sympathizing with their families, or mulling over the fact that our country had been brutally attacked by a dangerous clan of terrorists. Instead, I thought long and hard about my own future as a journalist. My selfishness and
obsession with becoming a successful news writer had begun to overshadow the tragedy of 9/11. I felt empty inside, indifferent and void of feeling. It was this same aloof attitude that helped me succeed in my first few years in journalism. If I kept my distance from the people I wrote about in my stories, my emotions wouldn’t get in the way. All I cared about at that point was “making it” as a journalist, so I figured the fewer distractions I was faced with, the better.

Looking back, I now feel guilty about my apathy toward 9/11, as well as the way in which my fellow journalists exploited the tragedy on the airwaves in order to boost ratings and make money through advertising. And since that terrible day in 2001, I too have been a part of the mass media machine; an entity responsible for using terrible, heart-wrenching situations to our advantage. But the reality is that tragedies like 9/11 are also moments in history when many Americans stop criticizing the media for a moment and just sit back and watch in awe. 9/11 was a legitimate news story that didn’t need any sensationalized language to help it draw in viewers. It was real news, and a story that everyone—not just Sheila—was interested in. Even the biggest media critics couldn’t help but be fixated. My observations of the news and television coverage of 9/11 was a jumping off point for a journalism career that started with my first overseas assignment.

By the time I moved to Japan in November of 2011, the tragic footprint of the World Trade Center and all of my doubts about joining the military felt a million miles away. The threat of terrorism was still looming and our country was officially at war, yet somehow, despite all of this, I felt like I was in heaven. I had joined the Navy, thinking I might get the chance to write for a lonely base newspaper on some desolate Midwest military post, but I had never really considered the option of going into broadcast
journalism. When I received my orders to work at a broadcast television and radio news station in Japan, I immediately expected the worst. At that point, I still desperately wanted to be a newspaper writer, not a television star, although it wouldn’t take long before I changed my mind completely. I spent my first year working in radio, waking up the base to a three-hour talk and music show called “Auburn and Kathy in the Morning.” Think *Good Morning Vietnam*, but in Japan, with a giant dose of estrogen. My co-host was Kathy Kaleel, the wife of an Air Force technical sergeant, a woman with a sultry voice meant for 1-900 numbers and a beautifully infectious laugh. While I loved our radio show, I had my eye on the television anchor desk. Just when Kathy and I had developed a small but loyal fan following—mostly the wives of deployed servicemen—Kathy decided to try her hand at being a stay-at-home-mom, and I was promoted over to the television department. A year later, I found myself knee deep in fresh, white powder.

With one hand holding the camera and one hand attempting to empty the load of snow out of the back of my pants, I trudged foot over foot up the steep mountainside. I was buried in snow, and already beginning to regret not taking the ski lift. But for some reason, I could never seem to figure those things out. When I got to the part where you’re supposed to unload, grab your poles and effortlessly glide down the mountain, I somehow always got caught up. The last time I had tried it, I was fourteen, and I had attempted to take a snowboard up one of those old-fashioned in-between the legs ski lifts that only operate on the bunny slopes. It took me letting six or seven of the lifts head up the hill skier-less before I finally got the courage to jump on one. Then, just as I had feared, the weight of the snowboard on my left leg was weighing me down, making me even more uncoordinated than I already was. I kept slipping, my body falling off, but one
arm hanging onto the pole as it continued to drag me up the mountain. The lift operators actually had to stop the machine in order to help me get off. So this time, I decided walking was a better plan.

Having lived in Japan for more than a year by then, I had grown to love the country, despite my negative attitude about moving to a place with the climate resembling that of the North Pole. I was traveling with a group of airmen from Misawa Air Force Base’s Civil Engineering Squadron that was on a ski trip to the Appi Kogen ski resort in Iwate. Some friends of mine had invited me along with them to write and videotape a special music video to air on our nightly newscast. By that time, I had earned a promotion to the main anchor position for the four-minute AFN Misawa Newsbreak. AFN, or the American Forces Network, was the only English-speaking television channel that aired in the entire northern section of Honshu where I was living. Many of the on-base residents liked to call it the American “Forced” Network because unless they wanted to watch sumo wrestling or one of those kooky Japanese game shows, they had little choice but to tune in.

It didn’t take long for me to get my wish of small-base stardom. Starting as a reporter, I lugged the 50-plus pound camera around with me everywhere I went, recording anything newsworthy and turning the lens around on myself whenever I needed a stand-up to complete the story. Earning the title of main anchor was just about the most important and exciting thing I’d done in my life at that point. If there was ever such a thing such as ‘small-town fame,’ this was it. Going into a bar or a restaurant meant being bombarded with questions about my job, comments about my anchoring style, and
sometimes, awkward stares from people who just couldn’t figure out why I looked so familiar. Even the local Japanese population seemed to tuning in.

“I risten to you to help with my Engrish,” a sweet girl in hot pink leg warmers informed me one afternoon while I was out shopping at the 100 yen store.

Normally, our newscast updates consisted of sterile military functions, things like command changes and mass promotions, filled with all the pomp and circumstance of military order. But on a good day, we got to cover cultural events such as the Hokkaido Cherry Blossom Festival, a two-day food, beer and sake party with one of the most gorgeous backdrops imaginable, fluffy white blossoms dancing through the air like tiny pink butterflies. Another time, I attended the Aomori Nebuta Festival, my camera capturing a kaleidoscope of color as the bright dragons and traditional Japanese floats glided eerily across the rain-drenched asphalt. I lived for those moments.

Most of the time, we were forced to stick with a rigid military agenda. Working closely with the base commander, we made sure the right messages got out at the right times. We learned about local sensitivities, why we should be careful what we say on the air, and how we should never, ever utter these two words: Pearl Harbor. When the Ben Affleck blockbuster movie came out with a title of the same name, we kept our mouths shut tightly.

We milked the aftermath of 9/11 for all it was worth. Every story, every public service announcement, and every radio show we broadcasted was littered with references to that fateful day. It became an excuse for celebration and sadness alike. Eagles and American flags became patriotic symbols that reminded us of 9/11, yet adopted the same trite, overused quality of the pictures of those burning buildings. On the one-year
anniversary of 9/11, our base commander gave us a day off to reflect on the tragedy, yet many of us spent it barbecuing, shopping or doing house chores, mindlessly going about our lives as if nothing ever happened. Our station aired a special pre-recorded newscast on the one-year anniversary. After a brief re-cap of the tragedy, we showed short sound bite clips of local Soldiers, Sailors and Airmen, as they told their personal stories about where they were when the planes crashed the year before. One man was watching his daughter’s birth. Another young woman was in New York visiting family, and said she saw the smoke rising firsthand. The stories were lavish, exaggerated and a chance for our interview subjects to one-up each other with a tale more terrifying than the last. No one mentioned the victims who died in the crash, or the fact that our country was facing turmoil.

But on that cold Japanese winter day in 2002—the year leading up to George W. Bush’s official declaration of war on Iraq—my assignment was special. My station’s commander-in-charge had allowed me to take two days off the anchor desk in order to complete the music video as a special favor to the squadron. The civil engineers funded my trip, complete with a lift ticket, a three-night stay in a fancy Japanese hotel, full access to the onsen hot bath, and even a multi-course traditional dinner, which included an endless supply of hot, cherry blossom sake washed down with tasty Sapporo beer. For a low-ranking Navy sailor, I was living the good life.

After what seemed like an eternity, I finally reached the top of Kogen Mountain. Plopping my body into a mound of snow, I lay back and rested my hooded head on the powder, breathing a deep sigh of relief. Despite the freezing temperatures and biting wind, I was sweating profusely inside my snowsuit, beads of moisture dripping down my
body and pooling in the elastic casing on my long johns. Once I was finally able to catch my breath, a giant fan of fresh powder sprayed across my body, leaving me with a face full of snow.

“Mmmhhppmph,” I sat up sluggishly, straining my abdominal muscles, the heavy snow weighing me down. I was trying to protect the camera with one mitten-covered hand, while trying to spot the culprit of the snow bath through the layer of flakes that were covering both of my eyes.

“Hey, ha ha ha, what’s uuuuuuppppp?” said a familiar voice with a California surfer accent.

I looked up and saw Nate and his buddy, the only two members of the squadron whom I knew before the trip. They were the ones who had helped me land the assignment, and despite the fact that they’d just nearly buried me alive, I appreciated them getting me out of Misawa for the weekend.

“Why don’t you two grab the rest of your buddies and do some jumps off this cliff here so I can get some shots of it?”

“Sweet,” said Nate, winking at me before sprinting toward the edge of the cliff.

I figured I was already sitting down looking over the best view of the mountainside, so I might as well take advantage of my position. From where I sat, I could see several thousand skiers and snowboarders swarming the mountainside. While nearly everyone on the mountain was bundled up and wearing dark ski goggles, it was still easy to tell the Americans apart from the Japanese locals. In the past year, I had learned that the Japanese are notorious for being gear junkies. While the Americans were mostly wearing dark, solid colored winter gear in grays and blacks, the Japanese seemed to be
reliving to the 1970’s with bright, neon-colored jackets, fluffy wool hats with giant poof balls and long, flowing tails; and in extreme cases, designer outfits covered in loud, flashy prints. The most memorable outfit I saw that day was on a man who looked to be in his early 60’s. I needed sunglasses to look at his one-piece, zip-up snowsuit, which was not only shiny and fluorescent, but it was completely covered in sparkly pictures of fruit. Bananas adorned his front pockets, grapes were spread across his chest, and strawberries outlined his jacket collar.

For the next half-an-hour, I filmed Nate and his buddies as they catapulted themselves off the mountainside, each of them turning into silly, adolescent boys as they showed off for the camera. Since I was already covered in snow, I decided not to worry about getting any colder or wetter. If I was going to get the shots I wanted, I knew I’d have to make a few sacrifices. By burying myself even deeper into the snow, I peered out the top of the hole like a soldier at battle, my camera as my weapon. With the sun now finally peeking out behind the clouds, the lighting for the video was ideal. When I pointed the lens up toward the ridgeline, the sun created a star-like flash on the lens, one that was eclipsed each time one of the guys threw themselves over the side. I had forgotten all about the cold.

That night, the members of the civil engineering squadron showed me an incredible amount of appreciation for helping them tell their story. Often when I videotaped stories on base, I faced resistance from my would-be subjects. People would see the obtrusive video camera—which, at that time, was about the size of a small dog, and usually rested on a tripod the height of a large dog owner—and would run the other direction. Getting an interview wasn’t always easy. But at Kogen Resort that winter day,
I had no trouble getting people to let me stick the camera lens in their face and ask them personal questions. *Why are you here this weekend? How much fun are you having? How deserving do you think you and the rest of the airmen are of this mini-vacation? If we go to war, do you think you will deploy to Iraq? How long do you think you will be gone? What about your family?* I asked these questions not with these service members in mind, but their wives who I knew would be tuning in to watch.

At that time, I didn’t know Sheila by name, but I knew there was an “ideal” viewer out there, a woman I was trying to reach out to as I gathered video and sound bites. I knew this woman—Sheila—was dreading the next deployment, but that a heartfelt interview with her husband might be just what she needed to get through her day. I do remember our operations manager telling us our target audience wasn’t necessarily the camouflage-clad military men we imagined, but instead, it was the Cheerios-covered women who were at home raising their kids. While much of the base population was deployed to top-secret locations to fight in the war, Sheila was stuck at her home away from home on Misawa Air Force Base. Although she was happily married, she played the role of a single mother, taking care of the children, the house and the pets all by herself. I know I didn’t think so at the time, but now that I am a mother, I understand that she was almost as much of a hero as her husband on the front lines. It sounds cheesy, but taking care of children by herself is incredibly admirable. It couldn’t have been easy for her, especially while knowing that her husband could have been killed at any moment. She must have excelled at her full-time job of motherhood, somehow able to juggle tasks that are nearly impossible for even the most capable couples to
perform. Night wakings, fevers, bad dreams, lice: all of these things were Sheila’s responsibility alone.

I now realize that Sheila probably only tuned into our newscasts because it was her only view into the outside world, a world that didn’t consist of diapers, nursery rhymes and loneliness. In my later news coverage, when her husband returned from a tour to Iraq or Afghanistan, we were told to point our cameras at her and her children, to zoom in on her salty, wet tears. We would even slow the video down for effect, her red dress flapping in the breeze at the same rhythm as the miniature American flag that the tiny baby in her arms was waving. It was the stale symbol that reminded us of 9/11, of war, and of patriotism. At the time, I saw nothing wrong with this, and I happily obliged with whatever direction my bosses gave me. But now looking back, by capturing these moments on camera, we did Sheila a disservice. Instead of exploiting Sheila and her family by reconfirming stereotypes about her role as a stay-at-home mom and a military wife, we should have given this woman a voice. If I could do it all over again, I would have interviewed her and asked for her real opinion about the war her husband was fighting. The American flags and the red dress told a visual story to our viewers, but I know she must have had much deeper, profound thoughts inside of her that the public wasn’t hearing about. I wish I had told that side of the story. Instead, I did what I had to do in order to stay in the good graces of my bosses.

After I finished capturing all the snow and ski video I needed, the squadron members treated me to a massage at the hotel onsen before we all headed down to dinner in our matching white kimonos and slippers. I felt like royalty. Not only did the squadron leaders stand up and thank me publicly for coming to help them spread the word about
their small and largely ignored mission, but many of the high-ranking commanders and master sergeants also pulled me aside separately to give me a personal thank you. They told me how much it meant to them that I would take a weekend of my own time in order to help them promote themselves. I could hardly believe what I was hearing. *I should be thanking them*, I thought to myself. *Were they kidding?* It was like being thanked for winning the lottery.

Back in Misawa that week, I edited the video together to the tune of Nate’s favorite *311* song: “Amber.” It was five minutes long and it aired in place of our AFN Misawa Newsbreak that Friday night. After it hit the airwaves, my coworkers went wild.

“Excellent job,” said my master sergeant, as she patted me on the back.

The members of the Civil Engineering Squadron were ecstatic. They told me I had an open invitation to any and all future squadron outings, and I got a signed thank you letter and an Air Force coin from their commander. It was thrilling, and I knew right then and there that joining the military wasn’t a mistake after all. I had finally found something I not only enjoyed, but that I was actually good at. There’s an old saying in the Navy: “You choose your rate, you choose your fate,” which basically meant that the job you choose when you enlist can either make your life a living hell, or make everyone else feel very, very jealous. I figured if life as a military journalist was this good, life as a network television reporter could only be that much better. I was going to reach that goal, despite how much hard work I knew it would take.
The drive felt like it would never end. For three days, I had been staring straight in front of me down a stretch of highway that seemed to grow longer as we traveled it. The yellow dotted lines kept me captive, the telephone poles passing by slowly and creating a dance in my head that resembled the lines on a hospital heart monitor, the threatening motion of peaks and valleys that could so easily be flattened and lifeless. And I too felt like I could just about die.

We were on our way to Rapid City, South Dakota where I would be starting a new job as a television news reporter for a tiny ABC news affiliate. After I left the military, I spent a year living in San Francisco and working odd jobs while I sent out resumes and waited for my big break. I thought we were never going to get there, and part of me hoped we never would. In just 62 hours, we’d installed and removed snow chains on our two vehicles four times. My dad, being the least mechanical person I know, is the last person I trust with heavy machinery in a snowstorm.

“Fan-fucking-tastic,” my dad shouted after shredding his hand on the cold, metal chains, snow covering his eyebrows and goatee like powdered sugar. An abominable snowman, he trudged off the roadway and stomped his feet in rage. We ended up paying a couple of chain monkeys in yellow slickers forty dollars to install the cables for us, a task they accomplished easily and in the same amount of time it took my dad to shout out a few more swear words.
“Forty-fucking-goddamn-dollars? You have got to be shitting me,” he screamed.

After we made it over the first mountain pass, I thought the worst part of the trip was behind us, but my dad is a true expert when it comes to sucking the last drops of fun out of anything that would otherwise be unpleasant but bearable. After all, I was the one who had decided to move halfway across the country, so my dad made sure that I not only suffered for it, but I also footed the bill.

At gas stations, he’d pull his pick-up truck behind my tiny silver sedan and start pumping while I ran inside to pay for both vehicles. My dad is notoriously cheap and self-serving, so regular gasoline wasn’t good enough for him. Instead, I also had to fork up the extra cost of premium, just to make sure he didn’t completely flip out. We stayed in seedy motels that rent by the hour, places with names like “The Ho Hum” and the “Rodeway Inn.” Concierges named Flo spoke to us with cigarettes dangling loosely from their pruned lips, recommending “nice places to eat” like Sizzler and McDonalds.

“Just a few more hours to go, honey,” my dad said at the final pit stop we made in Lusk, Wyoming. It was the best his mood had been since we left San Francisco, probably because he too knew the trip was finally getting close to being over.

The population of the town was 1,000, and the gas station sweatshirts read: “Lusk. Where the West begins.” This was the moment I knew I was in deep. There was no going back now. My dream of becoming a television newscaster had given me the courage to quit a well-paying clerical job, leave the amazing San Francisco flat I shared with my best friend, and ditch a budding but promising romantic relationship.
A few hours later, my dad turned his blinker on when he saw the turnoff to Rapid City, “The Star of the West” and my new home. We were officially in South Dakota, a state I had never imagined visiting, let alone moving to.

“Now is that the state with Mount Rushmore, or is it the one where Fargo was filmed?” my friends in California would ask me when I told them I was moving. I actually had to Google it in order to answer them.

The U-Haul trailer attached to my dad’s pickup truck swerved and rattled like a covered wagon as he made a left turn, my car trailing closely behind.

The whole town seemed to be made up of brick, dirt, and train tracks that ended abruptly, old coal wagons sitting lonely and abandoned. I couldn’t believe I was going to be living in this place for an undetermined amount of time. My goal was to get out in six months or less. If I worked hard, I figured I could put together a solid resume tape and land a job in a bigger market somewhere closer to home. I had not woken up one day and thought to myself, “I think I’ll move to South Dakota.” In fact, when I decided to make the move, I had to look on a map to see exactly where this place was, a state with a smaller population that most large US cities. Instead, I was moving there to “pay my dues” in TV broadcasting, and this move was a long time coming. Before I even began applying for television jobs, I had worked my tail off to earn a bachelor’s degree in Journalism, while simultaneously working a full-time desk job during my final two years in the Navy. My last military assignment was to write press releases and news stories for a small Naval Air Reserve near the coast of Malibu. Luckily, there wasn’t much happening in Point Mugu, California, so instead of pretending to look busy, I spent most days secretly working on papers for courses like “Ethics of Journalism” and “History of
the Media.” With a little bit of good timing and a lot of good luck, I had my bachelor’s degree certificate in hand the same day the Navy let me out with an honorable discharge. I’d been told time and time again that news directors wouldn’t even consider me if I didn’t have a degree. I’d also been warned, “it isn’t about what you know, but who you know.” Unfortunately, I didn’t know anyone.

I spent my first year back in the civilian world working in an office in the Financial District of San Francisco while actively hunting for television jobs. I sent out several hundred resume tapes to cities across the U.S., little places like Bakersfield, California and Missoula, Montana, only to get dozens of rejection letters from my would-be employers, and most often, no reply at all. I knew this was my big break. When the news director at the Rapid City NBC affiliate called to offer me the job, I didn’t hesitate for a millisecond.

“Yes!” I shouted through the phone, and then added, more quietly, “When do I start?”

Forget the fact that the job only offered $8.10 per hour, with no vacation for the first year. I chose to ignore that fact that there would be no cameraman to help me lug around the heavy equipment. Instead, I’d be working as a one-man-band journalist, playing instruments like the tripod, the camera, and the microphone, and making a musical score of bad TV.

I found a small cottage on Monte Vista in a more rural part of Rapid City, although most of the town was fairly sleepy. For $345 a month, I had a kitchen, a small bedroom, and a crusted over swamp cooler to save me from the stifling Midwest summer.
When I pulled up to the TV station on my first day of work, the giant plastic sign on the dilapidated building—an old golf pro shop—gave me chills. “KNBN NewsCenter1”, it read, the NBC logo immersed between the letters. My dream had finally come true. I was a real-life television newscaster, and I felt like nothing could stop me.

My first assignment was covering the soft opening of a brand new sushi restaurant. Ichiban was a progressive idea for Rapid City, considering that buffalo burgers and French fries were a fancy meal for most local residents. Meat and potatoes were standard fare in the Midwest, and I doubted that the thought of eating raw fish would appeal to people who were raised just about as far from the ocean as possible. It was my idea to do a story on Ichiban, one that was met with some resistance by my new station manager, Jim.

“Ewwww, sushi,” he said, his white hair combed straight and parted to one side. I’d been warned by my new coworkers—a gaggle of catty, but breathtakingly gorgeous 20-something, recent college graduates from Florida—that Jim could be difficult to work for. A staunch Republican and a good old boy, born and raised in Rapid City, Jim had strong views about what should and should not make its way onto his station’s airwaves. If it didn’t appeal to him, he would argue that it probably didn’t appeal to the local viewers either. My coworkers said Jim was adamant about pleasing the people who paid the advertising bills to the station. If he thought one of the station’s sponsors wouldn’t approve of a particular story, he simply wouldn’t air it.

“I give that place three months, tops,” he said, catching a glimpse of himself in the reflective window above my desk. He raised his eyebrows in approval at his image,
and then patted me on the back. “South Dakotans don’t eat sushi. Good luck with the story, and try not to get food poisoning!” Jim sauntered off down the hallway with his tie draped over his right shoulder like a gym bag, and his shiny black shoes click-clicking on the tiles.

“You think you can handle the equipment?” asked Jared, my news director, once Jim was out of sight.

“Absolutely,” I told him, feeling confident that my experience shooting and editing my own video in the Navy gave me a major one-up on my coworkers. Most of them had come straight from their college television stations, with not a single day of actual, on-the-job experience to bring to the table. It had been a couple of years since I had worked in a newsroom, but I knew once I was out in the field, it would all come flying back to me.

The story on Ichiban went better than I had expected. When I arrived at the restaurant, I found that the owners were surprisingly cosmopolitan for mid-westerners. They said they’d decided to open a sushi place because the closest place to find raw fish was in Denver—where sushi was flown in fresh every day—and the owners thought it was time to introduce their hometown residents to something outside their comfort zone. The interesting thing was, when I started interviewing customers who were brave enough to venture into the new restaurant, it became very apparent that Jim and any other sushi naysayers had severely underestimated the Rapid City population.

“I could hardly wait to try this place,” a 30-something woman on her lunch break told me, her dining partner a coworker of hers who had never tried sushi before.
“Sushi is my absolute favorite food, but I only ever get it when I travel,” she added.

The two women were surrounded by dozens of tiny rectangular dishes, bright green wasabi dollops adorning the corner of each one like the intricate décor on a fancy wedding cake. They devoured each bite eagerly, their chopsticks like weapons between their fingers.

Sitting next to the women on the modern black bar stools was an elderly couple wearing matching, mustard-colored Elks Club T-shirts and polyester pants. They looked as at-home and comfortable as if they’d just sat down at their church’s weekly Sunday morning pancake feed. Right away, the woman poured a healthy serving of soy sauce into her dipping bowl and carefully creased her paper napkin on her lap.

“We’d like to try whatever it is you recommend for first-timers,” she told the man working behind the sushi bar. He smiled and reached for a bright pink hunk of salmon with beautiful white lines painting its surface like artwork. While he worked on his masterpiece, I asked the couple what had brought them into the restaurant.

“Well, we were both born and raised here in Rapid City and we’ve never seen a sushi restaurant come through these parts. We just figured we’d better try it since we’re not getting any younger,” said the woman. Her husband, who was working on a mouthful of lime green edamame, merely nodded.

I was beginning to realize that the residents of my new home weren’t as sheltered and backwoods-bred as I had stereotyped them to be. In fact, they were surprisingly open minded and forward thinking. I was pleased. And just then, a perfect example of a “Sheila” walked in the door. Of course, it would still be a couple more years before I
would be officially introduced to Sheila as my ideal audience member, but for some reason, even without this knowledge, I was drawn to this particular customer.

“Cover your mouth,” she told a preschool-aged towhead wearing bright pink corduroy pants underneath a white princess dress that was clearly a former Halloween costume. The little girl stumbled and worked hard to balance on plastic high-heel shoes with tiny Cinderella decals adorning each toe. On the woman’s chest, a sleeping infant hung peacefully, cocoon-like, in a blue baby carrier, its tiny fingers curled into fists under its chin.

I waited until the woman had sat down at a square table in the center of the restaurant and gotten her daughter situated in a booster seat before I approached her.

“Excuse me ma’am, um, hi there. I’m a reporter for KNBN Newscenter 1, and I’m doing a story about the opening of Ichiban. What brings you here?” I asked her as I stuck my cracked and worn microphone in front of her nose, the black cord wound around my wrist like a set of rubber bangles.

She blushed. “Ah, well, truthfully, I just needed to get out of the house for a little bit. We’re kind of cooped up these days and I figure it would be good for all of us to get some fresh air. I was headed downtown to Armadillo’s, but then I saw the ‘Grand Opening’ sign out front here and thought ‘why not?’”

Her answer would be shocking to Jim, I thought, and that’s why she was perfect for my story. I ended up angling my story around these “sushi virgins” and how Rapid City residents were embracing this newly discovered cuisine. When it aired, my coworkers smirked and gawked at my stand-up in the piece, a sign-off where I bid the anchors farewell between bites of shiny raw tuna rolls.
“Reporting for Newscenter One. Back to you Tina,” I watched myself say as the Florida clan rolled their eyes and walked back to their respective cubicles. My coworkers at KNBN were neither supportive nor kind. In fact, they seemed to hate it when anyone other than themselves did a good job on a news story.

Jim, on the other hand, didn’t seem amused or impressed by my discovery that his hometown was filled with people who were willing to try new things. In fact, it seemed to annoy him.

“Bunch of goddamn hippies,” he said, head shaking as he walked out of the newsroom.

The high I’d felt while videotaping my story collapsed at Jim’s reaction. I had gotten so caught up in my excitement over the sushi story, that I’d forgotten what Jim and Jared had told me in my interview.

“Our main viewers are conservative, Republican, middle-aged mothers, most of whom have lived here their whole lives,” said Jared. “We try not to rock the boat too much when we’re deciding what stories to cover. Keep her happy, tell her what she wants to hear, and she’ll keep watching.”

The opening of Ichiban was one of the first and only stories I covered in Rapid City that didn’t have a pinpointed angle already in mind before I began shooting it. Jim’s reaction not only discouraged me, but also made me realize that if I was going to work my way up the newsroom chain in Rapid City, and then land a better job in a bigger market, I was going to have to play the game. Luckily, I didn’t have to wait long.

On my second day of work, I scored an opportunity to shine. It was a chance to prove to Jim that I was a serious journalist, or at least a moldable one who was willing to
follow direction. A day of training and shadowing Jared around the city ended with a breaking news story that no one had anticipated. Governor Mike Rounds announced he was going to sign House Bill 1215, or the Women’s Health and Human Life Protection Act, a proposed bill that would outlaw all abortions in South Dakota, with the exception of those needed to help save a mother’s life. Since the rest of Newscenter One’s reporters were already immersed in their own story packages for the day, Jared told me I’d be the lucky one to cover it.

On our way to the airport press conference, Jared gave me the background information about the bill so I’d be prepared for the interview. I sat hunched forward in the passenger seat of the station’s tiny red sedan, my feet resting on a pile of garbage on the floorboard. Old ballpoint pens, fast food wrappers and crumpled up news copy kept my shiny, patent leather black heels elevated while I scribbled furiously on my notepad. Jared told me that an extremist pro-life group had penned the bill, which would enact the most restrictive ban on abortion since Roe v. Wade. Planned Parenthood and its supporters were livid, and they’d already planned to begin gathering enough signatures to defer the law to a public vote. Jared explained how the governor’s signature on the bill was probably going to stir up a lot of attention, and possibly even make national headlines.

“This is going to make Governor Rounds extremely popular and unpopular, depending on who you ask,” he told me.

At the airport press conference, Governor Rounds slowly and theatrically signed a piece of paper for the cameras, switching angles and stopping after each letter in his name so each of the three TV stations could get the perfect shot for the evening news.
Afterwards, I headed to the Safeway to gather reaction from the community. Before I’d left the newsroom that afternoon, Jim had tainted my mind with his perception of how the community would feel about HB 1215.

“Now keep in mind, we live in a conservative city. Most people are going to be quite happy with this decision,” Jim warned me.

But when I began talking to people heading back to their cars with their grocery bags, I discovered that Jim’s assumptions were wrong. Sure, there were plenty of people who said they felt that outlawing abortion was a good move for South Dakota, but the majority of the men and women I interviewed told me they felt the law was much too extreme.

“Why should we tell women what they can and can’t do with their bodies?” a middle-aged father of three told me as he shut the backdoor hatch on his SUV.

“If this bill passes, I’m moving out of the state,” said a silver-haired woman in her fifties.

“What’s next? We’re going to tell people how to raise their children, what to wear, how to eat? This law is absurd, and it just proves how out of touch Governor Rounds is with his constituents,” added a young college co-ed from the School of Mines.

I returned to the station with at least twenty usable sound bites, more than half of which strongly criticized the abortion ban bill. But when I sat down to edit my piece together, I carefully chose ones that I knew Jim and the rest of the conservative residents in Rapid City would approve of. I figured if the viewers were mostly right-wing housewives, then I needed to give them something to relate to. I was afraid to tell the truth, and afraid that Jim would think I had somehow influenced my interviews to tell me
they didn’t approve of the bill. In order to validate myself as a fair and responsible reporter, I chose a few sound bites from people who disagreed with the governor’s decision, but I mostly stuck with the more moderate messages of the bunch. When my piece was finished, it looked as though most of the population of Rapid City was in support of banishing abortion. I had never been more disgusted with myself. But even so, I made the deliberate choice to deceive the public and alter my story, just so I could advance my own worth as a television reporter. I wanted a long career in the news business, and I was willing to do just about anything to achieve that. I knew that in order to advance as a reporter, I had to find a way to do stories that would interest this woman who I would eventually come to refer to as Sheila.

I spent the next six months misrepresenting and misleading the Rapid City community. I did dozens of stories on HB 1215; everything from pro-choice fundraisers and marches, to political fallout, to the long awaited day in November of 2007 when South Dakota voters rejected the bill with a sweeping majority. Every time I did a story on this bill, it was obvious that most residents of South Dakota residents opposed it. I too felt that the bill was crazy, but I knew that my opinion as a journalist didn’t really matter. In my mind, I couldn’t escape the fact that Jim and his conservative colleagues were watching. I knew that I had to deliver what they expected or I’d risk my reputation and maybe even my job. Plus, South Dakota was known for being a right-wing state, so I had to keep up that image. Sure, there were plenty of viewers out there who disagreed wholeheartedly with the bill, but they weren’t the ones signing my paychecks. Time and time again, I carefully chose quotes that would help give the illusion that the bill was likely to pass. My behavior made me so popular with Jim and Jared that eventually they
promoted me to the lead reporter position, meaning I got first crack at all the best stories. The Florida clan wasn’t very happy with this decision, but I wasn’t working for them so I tried not to let it bother me.

Looking back, I realize that what I did was unfair and unethical. If I could go back and do it all over again, I would have fought simply told the truth. I should have gathered the facts as I found them, gathered an equal balance of opinions from the community, and stuck to my job, which was to report, not influence and corrupt. But instead, I sold out and became one of those evil members of the media who care more about pleasing their bosses than they do about informing the public. It took me several years before I realized I could be a good reporter and tell the truth. In that time, I was also able to work my way up the broadcasting food chain to my next station: an ABC news affiliate in Reno, Nevada. It was there that I truly began to understand Sheila, and even respect her. Eventually, my loyalty to her allowed me to redefine her and change my own actions for the better. But it didn’t happen right away.
“Less than 24 hours after a man was shot to death in the parking lot of a crowded Sparks department store, the gunman is still on the loose. But police have found the suspect’s vehicle. For the latest on the investigation, let’s go live to Newschannel 8’s Auburn Hutton, in front of the Kmart on Oddie Boulevard. Auburn?”

I felt the contents of my stomach lurch at the sound of my name, and I immediately froze. The script in my hands felt untouchable, the crispy white paper crinkly and stiff beneath my sweaty palms.

“Uh—yes Pat, um thank you,” I said, panicking, and then glancing down at the papers folded lengthwise between my fingers. It was January of 2007, and I was debuting in my very first live shot at my new job in Reno. The chance to work for a market # 108 television station was truly a dream come true. Television markets are determined by population, and then assigned a number based on that population count. There are 210 television markets in the United States—with market #1 usually being assigned to New York or Los Angeles, and market #210 to a tiny town in Montana—so Reno’s # 108 slot was considered a middle market. In my eyes, this meant I was halfway to the top. I desperately wanted to fit in with my coworkers and impress my new boss with my ability to jump right into the thick of things.

“Well, this here parking lot behind me is—uh—where it all happened. It was around 4:00 p.m. yesterday when a man was shot to death,” I stammered, clearing my throat and rearranging the mess of scripts again. I looked down at my hands, paused, swallowed and continued. “The suspect, who is being described as a forty-something
Hispanic male, was—um—seen fleeing the area shortly after the shooting.” Looking down again, I cleared my throat a second time and tried my best to use a spooky voice to create tension, almost as if I was telling a ghost story. “And until this morning, the suspect was nowhere to be found,” I finished, emphasizing the last few words by widening my eyes and pursing my lips.

The package rolled and I breathed out a gigantic breath of air, only then realizing that I’d been holding it in tightly since the moment I had appeared on camera. I had exactly a minute and a half to regain my composure, deliver my closing lines, and go home to my safe and warm apartment where thousands of people would not be staring at me, judging me and criticizing my every move. I barely had enough time to pat down my flyaway hairs and pull a piece of white dog fur off my suit jacket when it was time to speak again.

“A neighbor I spoke with today told me it’s a shame, given all of the children who live in this area. Police are asking for help from the public, as always. If you know anything about the shooting, please contact the Sparks Police Department at 353-2231. Back to you, Pat.”

“Thanks Auburn.”

My closing lines weren’t nearly as disastrous as my introduction, but I still felt sick at the thought of my bumbling, sloppy first day on the air. I had wanted so badly to breeze through my live shot, delivering solid, crisp news copy while I glistened and shined on the air like a superstar. At that morning’s news meeting, I had jumped at the opportunity to cover a murder, knowing that unless some kind of plane crash, major disaster or unforeseen tragedy were to take place in the next few hours, I’d get to front
the lead story. At that point in my career, I would have done just about anything to help make myself stand out.

Two weeks earlier, I had packed up my short-lived life in South Dakota, crammed everything I could fit into my tiny car, and drove for two days straight through some of the most horrific snowstorms I’d ever seen, all so I could start my new life in Reno, Nevada. I only spent eight months living in the Midwest, which was just long enough to get some experience in broadcast journalism so I could move up in the career ranks.

“Welcome to K-O-L-O,” the news director, Jack Bowe, had said to me as we drove through the Biggest Little City in the World in his old beat up pickup truck. He told me he liked to take all his new reporters on a tour through Reno so they could get a feel for the style and flavor of the town. I had never been to Reno before, despite the fact that I grew up just three hours from the high desert. It wasn’t a place I had ever had any desire to visit, let alone move to, but the drive through town somehow intrigued me.

“And this is the Truckee River,” he said, waving a floppy, liver spot-covered arm toward an old historic bridge that spanned across the icy waterway. It was a section of the river that was surrounded by eclectic coffee shops, theaters, restaurants, and even a four-story brick building advertising vacancies for “Artist Lofts.” Who knew Reno was so progressive and artsy? I had only heard negative reviews from my friends and family back in the Bay Area. Jack told me that Reno was famous for marriages—and divorces for that matter—and that in the old days, divorcees would throw their wedding rings from this very bridge.

“Rumor is, Marilyn Monroe has even thrown a ring or two into that river,” he added, winking at me.
We continued on Virginia Street through downtown, driving under the famous Reno Arch, its letters aglow with thousands of blinking, flashing and twinkling light bulbs. We passed casinos, pawn shops, homeless men holding cardboard signs, street walkers, and dozens of tiny hotels with signs advertising weekly rates. At first glance, Reno felt cheesy, seedy and run down, but in an almost edgy, appealing sort of way. It immediately felt like home.

KOLO were the call letters of my new station, but during the station’s 50 plus years on the air, it had been known by a variety of other names. Eye Witness News, News You Can Use, News You Can Trust, and when I started, News Channel 8. The name only became KOLO, pronounced “Co-low” after a group of consultants from out of town came to our station and told us we needed a makeover. Unfortunately, the name “KOLO” didn’t go over very well with the viewing public.

“It sounds too much like ‘colon’,” one viewer complained, informing us that she would be switching to one of our competitors unless we changed our name back to News Channel 8. Hundreds of other viewers emailed and called the station to let us know that they didn’t like the new station moniker. But even with a name that reminded our viewers of poop, KOLO had been the number one rated TV station in the Reno television market for close to forty years, so I felt incredibly fortunate to have landed a job there.

Jack gave me a three-year contract for just $28,000 a year—plus medical benefits, a clothing allowance, and free haircuts and makeup—to become KOLO’s newest female sex object. I knew better than to kid myself and believe that I was being hired only for my writing and editing skills. As much as I wanted to be a serious and respected
journalist, I was smart enough to know that TV journalism was just a little bit shallower than that.

“Watch out for Terri,” Jack told me on my first day on the job. “She hates women and she’ll eat you alive. I don’t know if you noticed how she looked at you during your interview, but she’s threatened by you,” he said.

Terri Russell was KOLO’s one and only female reporter at that time, a 40-something Reno native with dark features, a wardrobe of neon-colored 1980’s sportswear, and a major chip on her shoulder. She hated me from day one. The drive-by shooting story had originally been assigned to her, but she’d immediately complained that it wasn’t worthy of covering, and so I landed it by default.

“What am I going to do, go around knocking on neighbor’s doors? There’s no story here,” said Terri, her thick arms crossed protectively over a too-tight, purple suit jacket. While I was shocked at Terri’s bad attitude and behavior at the time, I later learned this was common among reporters, especially veteran ones like Terri who had been working in the business for decades.

“Yes, that’s exactly what you should do,” replied Jack. “This is a residential neighborhood. There are playgrounds in the area. Ask the local mommies how they’d feel if they’d been shopping at Kmart when the bullets were flying. Actually Terri, you know what? Forget it. Auburn, how would you like to front the lead story today?”

While I knew my coverage of the story would mean Terri would end up disliking me more than she already did, I needed it in order to help prove myself to the rest of the station managers.

“Absolutely, I’ll do it,” I said, staring nervously down at the patent leather bows
on my shiny black pumps. When I headed out the station door, a reporter’s notebook in
my hand, I knew exactly what I had to do. After eight months at my starter station in
South Dakota, I had learned how to play the game. I knew that if I wanted to earn the
trust of my new bosses, I needed to fork over whatever it was they asked for.

My photographer, Darryl, and I spent the morning playing phone tag with tight-
lipped, reluctant detectives who didn’t have much information they wanted to share with
us about the drive-by shooting. For the rest of the afternoon, we cruised up and down the
mostly empty streets of the neighborhood behind Kmart, hoping to gather enough video
and sound bites to tell the story we wanted. I knocked on doors and chatted with Sheila
types, tired-looking stay-at-home moms who answered their doors silently after removing
neon Post-it notes from their doorknobs that read: Shhh...Baby Sleeping. Darryl
crouched down on the warm asphalt, gathering shots of children’s toys and chalk-drawn
hopscotch grids, blurring the video and fading it to black, which was meant to leave our
viewers wondering what horrible thing might have happened to those kids.

Despite my terribly rocky first live shot, the story itself was a success. Through
careful editing and shot selection, I had given the impression that the children who lived
in the neighborhood near where the shooting took place were in serious danger. The truth
was, the police had told me that the shooter had targeted his victim, and that the location
of the crime was only a coincidence. “Gang members shoot gang members,” the detective
had said, although I didn’t use that sound bite in my story. Instead, I made it seem as
though any unlucky child could have been killed, had they been in the wrong place at the
wrong time. It was the type of story Sheila would be drawn to, and it would keep her
coming back to watch our newscast night after night, hoping to hear that an arrest had
been made and that her children were safe once again. It was also the type of story that would help me gain respect as a serious and ambitious reporter.

I had intentionally spread fear in the Reno community that day, and I was praised for it. “Excellent angle on the story, Auburn,” said Jack, offering me a high five. Despite the fact that I knew I was essentially lying to thousands of people who were watching the news, it felt good to be pleasing my bosses. I knew if continued to appeal to this mystery woman, this “ideal viewer” who I had come to know intimately at that point, then I would continue to succeed as a reporter. My career path depended on my ability to pander to her, but at that point, I still didn’t have a name for her. It wasn’t until several months later, when that infamous group of out-of-town consultants came to our station from the Gray Broadcasting Corporation headquarters in Atlanta, Georgia, that I finally put a name to the face. Sheila and I had been officially introduced.
“Let’s just get it all out in the open, shall we? I’m a born-again Christian and a right-wing conservative. I don’t care if you swear, smoke and steal, but don’t let me catch you using God’s name in vain while you’re in this newsroom, y’all hear me?”

This was my new boss. Three months after starting work at KOLO, Jack Bowe retired, and a 30-something, part-time Navy Chaplain named Bob Page took over as our station news director. Originally from Texas, Bob had spent the past few years working at a San Diego television station as an assignment editor. His six-foot-six tall frame and sharp military crew cut made him seem intimidating, and he used that to his advantage.

“Hey numbskull,” he shouted across the newsroom to Craig, our tape operator. “Turn down the heater again and I’ll fire you on the spot.” Bob held up two fingers, pointing them at his own eyes and then toward Craig, as if to say, *I’m watching you.* He shivered theatrically and then stalked off to his office, his giant legs like telephone poles. I hated Bob immediately, but for some reason he thought our Navy ties made us comrades in civilian life as well.

“Auburn, you’re one of the good ones, I can tell,” Bob said during his second week of work. He had pulled me out of the news meeting and into his office.

“Don’t get tainted by the bad attitudes out there,” he said, nudging his head toward Terri’s empty chair in the newsroom. “We’re Shipmates, remember?” I’m still not certain if Bob realized that by the time I worked at KOLO, I had been free of my military obligations for almost three years. But I knew I needed to stay on this man’s good side.

“Right,” I said as convincingly as I could.
Bob’s presence in the newsroom created anxiety like none of us had ever experienced before. There was an ugly rumor going around the station that anytime new management was brought in, a mass firing would take place soon after. We’d all heard about the infamous “Black Friday” where the general manager of KOLO wiped out the entire newsroom in one sweep. Bob did nothing to alleviate this fear.

“You’re either meant to do this job or you’re not,” Bob told me one afternoon after I’d returned from a 14-hour day of wildfire coverage. I’d been giving hourly updates from the shoulder of Interstate 80 since 4:30 that morning; I was exhausted, starving, and I smelled like a s’more. The last thing I wanted to do was have a heart-to-heart with my scary boss.

“I’m just not sure you have what it takes, Auburn. I haven’t seen much improvement from you since I started here, and I’m wondering if you’ve developed a bit of an ‘attitude?’”

My heart nearly stopped. What?

“I’m going to have to let you go,” said Bob, and then leaned back in his swivel chair, bridging his long fingers together and letting out a bored sounding sigh.

“You’re not serious. I mean, really? I thought I had been doing exactly what you wanted lately, and plus, you even said I did great with my coverage of the Angora fire,” I pleaded.

“You had moments of pure genius and moments of pure stupidity,” he said.

I didn’t have the first clue what he meant by that, but I wholeheartedly disagreed with his assessment of my performance. I was doing a good job, and I knew it. Of all the reporters, I was always the first one to volunteer for a challenging story, and the last one
to complain when they sent me up to the Mount Rose summit to stand in a snowstorm, or when they woke me up in the middle of the night to fill in for a sick morning reporter. This was coming at me totally out of left field. Was Bob on some type of power trip? Was he mentally ill? I had no idea, but I could feel my career slipping away, and it terrified me.

“Tell you what,” reasoned Bob, “I’ll give you until August to prove yourself to me. If you’re not up to my standards by then, you’ll have to pack your bags.”

“Oh, I agreed, between sobs. “I’ll do my very best.”

I went home that Friday night feeling humiliated, deflated and most of all, angry. I wondered how he could get away with treating me like an expendable employee when I had been working so hard to impress him. While part of me wished he had just gone ahead and fired me, I couldn’t imagine my broadcasting career being over when it had only just begun. I spent the weekend at home, swearing to myself over and over again that I would do whatever it took to keep my job and prove to Bob Page that I was a dedicated and talented employee.

Bob’s threats instilled doubts in me that didn’t exist before he came into my life. I was on a roll career-wise, moving up in markets, growing and improving as a reporter. His words stung and made me wonder what I was lacking. Is my voice too scratchy? Am I too ugly? Am I too fat? Am I a terrible reporter? I began tiptoeing carefully around the newsroom, avoiding Bob when possible, but sprinting to his side if he so much as whispered my name. I felt like a slave, but my unhappiness was overshadowed by my fear of being let go. At that time, I wanted more than anything in the world to be a successful television reporter with a long and memorable career.
I soon found out two other young reporters on our staff had had similar near-firing experiences with Bob, and they too had been given different deadlines for their own improvement. He had given each of us an ultimatum: Get on board with his plan, or get out. Since the company consultants had recently visited KOLO and introduced to the ideal viewer named “Sheila,” everyone at our station was on a mission to find stories that catered to ignorant, simple housewives. Bob had voiced a strong belief in targeting our stories to appeal to her, so Sheila’s name suddenly became equated with staying employed. I, for one, was more than eager to find stories that both Bob and Sheila would approve of.

While I hesitate to give Bob credit for making me a better reporter, his poor treatment of me did help me indirectly. Instead of continuing to doubt myself, I persevered. Over the next few months, my on-air capabilities improved, my confidence skyrocketed, and Sheila’s presence in my life grew. On a daily basis, I would hear other reporters name-dropping her moniker all over the newsroom during our morning meetings or in the afternoons as they were revising their scripts. Sheila this, and Sheila that, and Sheila will loooove this story. It was all about Sheila.

“What does Sheila care about?” our assignment editor, Scott, would ask as he put together a daily plan. “Okay, we’ve got a political scandal at the state capitol, a gas leak downtown, and a national recall on Similac baby formula. Um, I think we all know what Sheila’s interested in,” he’d say, grinning, as he sent one of the reporters out the door to stand in front of Safeway and interview moms while they pushed their grocery carts out to their minivans.
Bob constantly reminded us that Sheila was watching, and he often used this as an opportunity to demean her as well. When meaningful, complicated, or culturally rich stories came up, Bob would shoot them down if he didn’t believe they would suck Sheila in.

“This lady is stay-at-home mom, folks! She’s not interested in hearing about the Downtown Development Association. She spends her Friday nights in front of the boob tube! Come on people, get with the program!” he’d shout from his perch behind the assignment cubicle.

Bob labeled Sheila as a stupid, frumpy couch potato with nothing better to do with her time than watch our newscasts. I began to imagine her sprawled out on a dirty, brown couch, holding a bag of potato chips in one hand and the remote control in the other. Three or four bratty, snot-nosed children crawled all over her while she shouted, “Get out of the way, I can’t see the TV!”

I often jumped at the chance to cover stories that were tailored for Sheila. They were the type of light, airy reports that often tugged at the heartstrings and gave people goose bumps. Other times, they instilled fear in people and urged them to look at life through a filter of worst-case scenarios. Little by little, my shallow reporting contributed to a loss of respect for “Sheila,” this prototype of an ideal viewer. While I knew she wasn’t a real, living, breathing human being, she felt incredibly authentic. I began to see her as a lesser person; a woman who could easily be manipulated and molded by the content of my news stories. Instead of carrying out my duty as a journalist and trying to educate her through thoughtful, fair reporting, I chose stories that would act like cheap bait and lure her in like a slippery fish. I went so far as to start labeling women I ran into
around town as “Sheilas” if I thought they fit the mold. Middle aged? Check. Overweight? Check. Uneducated? Check. Definitely a Sheila, I would think to myself. A few times, I even interviewed women whose real names were actually Sheila. That always got a good laugh from my colleagues at her expense.

Most of the writing I did for Sheila was in the form of shallow, fluffy news stories that filled time slots on days when the scanner traffic was nearly nonexistent. When there were no fatal car accidents to cover, I settled for a feature on shopping for new school supplies. When fire season ended, I did a story about the type of dress the Governor’s wife would be wearing to the inaugural ball. It didn’t matter that these packages were completely void of any educational substance or meaning. We knew Sheila would be tuned in. And once in awhile, a really big story would appear, and we would know we had hit the Sheila jackpot.

One of those stories came along just a few months after Bob was hired. My potential firing date had come and gone, but Bob had never again mentioned letting me go. I think he knew he had scared me into following his lead. Darryl and I were shooting a sweeps piece on renter’s rights for the July ratings book. We had just finished up an interview with a woman from the Nevada Renter’s Association and were headed back to our news jeep when we heard a small voice.

“I’ve got a story for you.”

I looked over and saw a very pregnant teenager sitting cross-legged on the cement steps overlooking the Truckee River. The girl looked as though she had had a hard life. Her teeth were gray and dirty, her clothes wrinkled.
“If you’re looking for a good story to put on the news, I have one for you,” she repeated, staring at me seriously.

“Whatcha got?” I asked her casually, since I doubted her story would have any substance. I was used to random citizens giving me story ideas, and they often had to do with their own child’s recent bout with bullying, or the fact that they feel the price of local museum tickets is a scam. Very rarely did anyone offer up a story I could actually use.

“Well, the father of this baby was my teacher, and once she’s born, I will show you the paternity test to prove it. I’m Cassie, by the way,” she said, offering out a stiff hand.

I shook her palm gently, feeling surprisingly intrigued. “I’d like to hear more about this,” I told her, “But I’ve got to get back to the station. Give me a call when you have the test.”

“You won’t be sorry,” she said smugly.

A few weeks later, Cassie called and told me a story that I was sure would soon make national headlines. She explained how her parents had been absent most of her life, and that in seventh grade, her teacher, a man named Dan O’Brien, had become a guardian of sorts, looking after her in school and even offering up his couch for her to sleep on when her Mom was too drugged out to care. Cassie, who was now 19 years old, said she’d remained close with Dan through high school, and eventually lived with him full time. It wasn’t until after she graduated that she became pregnant with her daughter, who according to a paternity test that Cassie faxed to me, was the offspring of Dan O’Brien.
“Holy smokes,” said Bob, when I told him about Cassie and her baby. “Drop your sweeps piece for now and just focus on this story. And hurry, before those nitwits and Channel 2 catch wind of this.”

The next morning, Darryl and I interviewed Cassie at her home in Sun Valley. The place was filthy, reeked of cat urine, and made Cassie’s story seem even more heartbreaking than it already was. She cried on camera, claiming that Dan O’Brien had seduced her. She said he’d used her vulnerabilities to his advantage, gotten her to trust him, and then swooped in for sex just as soon as she turned 18. Darryl spent more than an hour videotaping Cassie and her baby together, playing peek-a-boo, laughing and bonding. We played up the fact that Cassie had a hard upbringing, but was persevering as a mother anyway. When the story aired, Bob sat back in his officer recliner, biting his fist in anticipation.

“Sheila’s going to eat this up,” Bob said, laughing. “Cassie could remind her of her own daughter or niece. Gold mine!”

The story created a buzz in the community that lasted for weeks. The Washoe County School District superintendent agreed to a follow-up interview with our station, and he vocalized strong displeasure in Dan O’Brien’s behavior.

“The Washoe County School District does not condone this type of behavior. Mr. O’Brien has resigned from his teaching position, and proper measures were taken to make sure he does not teach in this district again. The issue has been dealt with,” he told me, with a deadpan face.

Hundreds of parents called in and emailed our station, wanting more details about the story, and voicing their disgust with the situation. We called Dan O’Brien dozens of
times for a response, but our calls were not returned. Months later, after we’d all moved onto new stories and forgotten about Cassie and her baby, we received a call from Dan O’Brien’s attorney.

“We would like to request that you please remove the damaging story about my client from the KOLO website. Mr. O’Brien has already suffered the consequences for his behavior. He would now like to move on with his life, but this story is the first thing a potential employer sees when they look for background information on him. It’s been very difficult for him to get a job,” said the attorney.

When I asked Bob what we should do, he agreed to go ahead and erase the story as if it never existed. He assured me that no one would even miss it.

“That story is old news,” said Bob. “Delete it.”

I was shocked that he’d give in so quickly. What about freedom of the press? Our story was accurate. We had checked our facts, offered Dan a chance to respond, and made sure to practice responsible journalism. There was no reason we should erase the story, other than to avoid the chance for a potential lawsuit. Dan didn’t have any real grounds for suing us, but I knew from experience that attorneys made news directors very uncomfortable. We deleted the story from our website that day, and we never heard from Dan O’Brien or his attorney again. Just like that, he was off the hook. It was as though the affair, the pregnancy, and the baby never existed at all. It was wiped away from history in mere seconds. Bob was right about one thing: the story was old news. Not a single person asked us where the story went or why we deleted it. It didn’t matter anymore. Dan O’Brien’s past had been dug up and aired out for all to see, and now that we were done capitalizing on his bad behavior, we no longer cared about holding him
accountable. He could now move on and go about his life like nothing ever happened. And did it really matter anyway? Technically speaking, Dan hadn’t really done anything seriously wrong. He had slept with a consenting adult. Sure, she was a former student with some emotional troubles, but she was 18 years old when it happened. The whole story felt like one big, over-sensationalized flop. I couldn’t believe I was working for such an irresponsible and money-hungry company.

After the Dan O’Brien story, something within me changed. I began to be more careful about the stories I chose and agreed to cover. I was sick and tired of drama-filled, sensational stories, and I started seeing the value in stories that did more than just lure in Sheila. By this time, Bob’s inappropriate and unfair management techniques had begun to wear on everyone at KOLO. My coworkers and I had begun to realize that not only were his demands unreasonable, but it seemed he may also have had a few screws loose. I made a decision to stop doing news packages that had little value other than destroying people’s lives so our station’s greedy owners could make a buck. I was sick of choosing story content based on what would rile up and anger Sheila the most, just so we could be certain she would keep watching. The final straw for me came the next April.

It was a slow news day, and I was feeling uninspired. Our assignment editor, Scott, had offered up a couple of story options, none of which appealed to me. I didn’t feel like doing another warm weather activities package, and I was sick and tired of the “what if a (insert natural disaster here) occurred in our city” angle that we often took when nothing was going on. Bob, who seemed to sense my bad attitude about the day’s potential for a solid newscast, suggested I do a story about “the meaning of Easter.”

“The meaning of Easter?” I laughed, assuming he was joking.
“No I’m serious. Sheila and her children are probably going to do an Easter Egg hunt this weekend, so we should give her some background on this important religious holiday. You do know the Easter Bunny is a pagan tradition, right?” asked Bob. “I just want to make sure the spiritual meaning isn’t lost on our community.”

I could not believe what I was hearing. Here I was, capable of covering any hard-hitting, serious news story he threw my way, and he wanted me to do a story about the meaning of Easter? And on top of that, he was going to force me to insert his religious agenda into my piece. I felt sick to my stomach.

“Bob, I don’t want to do a story on the meaning of Easter. I’m sorry, but I just don’t think that’s a good story,” I said, acting braver than I felt.

“Well Auburn, sometimes you have to do stories that you don’t like,” he replied, smiling sarcastically and crossing his arms.

Refusing to do a story was a major newsroom no-no, and I’d come pretty close to crossing that line. Bob was going to make me do this story, whether I liked it or not. And because I’d expressed displeasure in it, he was going to scrutinize it down to the very last video frame. I knew I was screwed.

Darryl and I head out the station door around 10:00 that morning, but it took us most of the day to gather what we needed. We drove around the city aimlessly while I scoured the phone book for the number to a priest or a minister, anyone who could give me an interview about the meaning of Easter. I was furious that Bob was forcing me to do a pointless story with religious undertones, just so he could satisfy his Christian agenda while showing me that he was the boss and I would obey him. Underneath my anger, I felt a strong sense of protectiveness over Sheila who I knew would be watching. I knew
she deserved better. Why should she be forced to listen to a generic, propaganda-filled news package when there were so many more interesting things happening in our community? Furthermore, by doing this story, we were insinuating that Sheila was so unintelligent that she had no idea Easter had deeper significance than the cheesy, pastel-colored Hallmark holiday it has become. I was disgusted with our station, with Bob, and with myself for treating Sheila like an imbecile. Whether or not our typical female viewers were intelligent, there was no reason to dumb down the content of our newscasts. While I hated the idea of a story about the meaning of Easter, it ended up being a catalyst for change. The story helped me realize that if I really wanted to be the type of journalist I could be proud of, I needed to stop pandering to the consultants version of “Sheila” and start digging deeper, asking questions, and searching for the truth. I needed to start doing stories with depth and substance, and ones that contained intelligent and meaningful content.

Darrell and I made the best of the cards we were dealt that day. Instead of giving Bob a story filled with quotes from Bible-worshipping conservatives like himself, we interviewed a moderate Methodist pastor who told us the religious significance of the holiday, along with an explanation of how the majority of both religious and non-religious families like to celebrate it. And instead of interviewing church-going Sheila types, we headed to none other than the local Hallmark Store. There, we gathered a wide range of interviews from local residents of all ages, sexes and backgrounds, most of who agreed that while the religious meaning of Easter is important, the majority of people celebrating the holiday are more excited to hunt for eggs, wear pastel colors, eat fancy brunches, and spend quality time with their families. I knew that despite Bob’s original
intentions, Sheila was going to like my story much better the way I did it. I felt proud, and for the first time, like Sheila was becoming more to me than just a faceless, hollow being. Sheila had begun to feel like a friend.
Dry spells are common in television news. Sometimes it seems like months will go by without a single worthwhile news story. Dishwasher recalls and construction detours often top the evening newscast, and anchors fill time with useless chit-chat about the weather, the latest sports victory, or—if they’re feeling really desperate—their personal lives. It’s a painful period for us reporters, because if there’s nothing going on, the bored producers will often create news.

Not long after Bob forced the meaning of Easter down my throat, one of these dry spells took place. Wildfire season had not yet begun, and while it was a relief that no one’s house was burning down, I couldn’t help but secretly wish something would spark up. It was a sweltering spring day, and I knew if I didn’t come up with a story quickly, I’d be forced to head down to Wingfield Park and do yet another “hot weather activities” story. Just like the last time I did this story (and the time before that), I’d loiter outside ice cream shops, waiting for a Sheila-type to come out with her children in tow so I could ask her how she was enjoying the high temperatures. I would treat her answers as though they were profound, although they were anything but. “The river feels great!” she’d say enthusiastically, and I’d smile politely while I imagined sticking my finger down my throat and gagging. These stories bored me beyond belief, and they served no purpose for our viewing public, other than stating the obvious. So the weather is hot. So what? We live in the desert. I always wondered if anyone would even notice if I just took a hot weather story from the year before and re-aired it. I doubted it.

_Pshhh. 10-92. There’s a car parked illegally on Fourth Street near the city line._

_Pshhh. Copy._ The scanner traffic in our white news jeep was hissing and buzzing with
mundane emergencies; heart attacks, seizures, fender benders and car break-ins were happening all over town, but there was nothing sexy or interesting enough to fill a slot in our 5:00 p.m. newscast.

My iPhone rang, making me jump. It was the newsroom calling.

“Hey, how’s it going out there?” asked Pat, our evening anchor.

“Well, aside from the fact that there isn’t anything interesting going on in this town right now, everything is fine,” I replied.

“Lucky for you, I think we’ve got a great Sheila story,” he told me. “Why don’t you and Darrell go by the DMV? Apparently their air conditioning is broken and people are melting in there. See if you can get some shots of Sheila with her young kids. Try to focus on people looking hot, you know, fanning themselves, sweating, that type of thing. We’ll work on the official side of things to try to find out why it’s taking so long to fix it,” said Pat.

Ugh, I thought. “Okay, sounds good. We’ll head right over there and I’ll call you later on with an update.”

We’d been driving around all morning, cruising up and down Reno’s main drags, hoping we’d come across a good story. Pat’s phone call should have been a relief to me, but the thought of trying to make a busted air conditioner into news was excruciating. Plus, I had pitched a story about a new family restaurant opening in our morning meeting, only to be shot down by naysayer Bob. I didn’t want to try to force-mold yet another non-story into a story.

On our drive over, the package began to take shape in my head. From the urgency in Pat’s voice when he called, I was picturing sedan-sized industrial fans blowing across
the lobby floor, rustling papers in the hands of the DMV customers, car titles and registration forms flapping like the leaves on a quaking aspen tree. Sheila would be there, of course, in her many shapes and forms.

We’d see her with her three kids, two in a stroller and one in a front carrier, all of them crying as she dabbed cold compresses on their sweaty little foreheads. In another corner, we’d see her on her lunch break from Walmart—just one of the three jobs she juggled—giant sweat circles forming under the armpits of her dingy blue uniform. Then in another section of the waiting room, a more outspoken version of Sheila, loudly complaining to DMV management about the heat in the building; she’d be telling them she was late for a parent-teacher conference and how dare they keep her waiting so long. There was something about a slow news day that helped my imagination run wild.

“Now serving window number G19. Now serving window number G19,” said a voice over the DMV loudspeaker as I pushed open the glass revolving door with my elbow. Darrell heaved his giant camera up and over his shoulder, handing me the microphone and a long black cable that dragged at my feet. Looking around the DMV, I quickly assessed the situation. As expected, a line of disgruntled looking people snaked through the beige-colored corridor and nearly out the entrance. Most of the people in line were middle-aged men. The chairs in the center of the waiting room were filled with anxious people holding little horseshoe-shaped slips of white paper with numbers on them, their eyes never leaving the little red electronic signs. While there were no fans, no sweaty armpits and no angry Sheilas, it was undoubtedly hot, and the unmistakable smell of dirty diapers permeated the stale air.
I approached the first Sheila I could find, a thirty-something brunette whose watery, bloodshot eyes made it look like she hadn’t had a good night of sleep in years. In one hand, she held an old-fashioned Nevada license plate with rusty corner edges. In the other, she barely grasped the slippery, grimy hand of a small, freckle-faced boy wearing a Pokemon t-shirt.

“Excuse me, ma’am. Sorry to bother you. I’m with KOLO 8 News, and I’m wondering how long the air conditioning has been out in here? And how are you and your son holding up?” I asked her, using my very important reporter voice.

“Um, well,” she stammered, “what—do—you mean, ‘holding up?’ We’re just waiting for our number to be called.”

“Well, aren’t you frustrated with the heat in here? Isn’t it true that DMV management has failed to repair the air conditioning system, even though it’s more than 90 degrees outside and the safety of you and your son are now compromised?”

She stared at me with a blank expression.

“Ma’am?” I urged again, curling the black cord around my left wrist while shoving the silver microphone closer to her face.

“I’m not really sure what you’re asking me, but my son and I are fine. To tell you the truth, we didn’t know the air conditioning wasn’t working,” she said, smiling.

“Now serving window number G20. Now serving window number G20.”

“That’s us,” said the woman. “I gotta run, sorry. Good luck on your story!”

I watched Sheila lead her son up to the counter where a round man with a nametag greeted her with a grunt. It was a typical day at the DMV. People looked irritated, but it had nothing to do with the heat. I could only assume that a citizen with
way too much time on his hands must have called our TV station to report the air conditioning outage. There had probably been a long wait time for a driver’s license so he felt like getting back at the government by sparking up some bad press coverage. I shook my head in disgust and turned to Darrell.

“Come on, let’s get out of here.”

On the way back to the station, I called Pat and broke the bad news.

“There’s no story, Pat. We just left the DMV.”

“Why did you leave? We have you going live there in the 5:00 show.”

“There just isn’t a story, Pat. No one seems bothered by the fact that there’s no AC in there. Honestly, it’s business as usual.”

“Why are you being difficult?” he asked me. “You need to go back and interview Tom Jacobs. He’s the DMV spokesperson. Give them a chance to defend themselves.”

“Defend themselves from what? There is no story, I promise you! If you’d like to drive down to DMV and see for yourself, then maybe you’d believe me. I’m not going to bad mouth the DMV or make up some elaborate, hot weather drama, just so we have something to top our newscast. I’m sorry, but there just isn’t a story here.”

“Fine, see you back here in a few,” Pat said and hung up on me before I had a chance to respond.

I knew I was going to be in trouble for failing to deliver the story I was assigned, but I was willing to take whatever criticism came my way. I thought about Sheila sitting at home, and how I’d stood up for her that day. I had also maintained my integrity as a journalist, and I was proud of that. I knew I could have easily asked leading questions to a Sheila-type at the DMV, and then carefully edited her sound bites so she sounded
frantic, distraught and overheated. Darrell could have focused his camera in on people wearing tank tops and flip flops, creating a summer-like ambiance that reminded people of fiery hotness. The story would have shed a negative light on the DMV, and in turn, created controversy based on a completely fabricated story. But instead, I chose to do the right thing and simply tell the truth. Because the truth is what Sheila deserved.

By the next morning, Pat seemed to have forgotten about my defiant behavior the day before. A newer, better story had already captured his attention, and he was happily sipping his coffee while he scanned the World Health Organization (WHO) website.

“Morning, Auburn,” he said without looking up at me. “Don’t get comfortable. There’s a presser at 10:00 at the Washoe County Health Department on Ninth Street. The first case of swine flu just showed up in Reno.”

This was big news. Swine flu had been all over the national news circuits for days. The Mexican government had to shut down schools and businesses to keep the virus from spreading, and cases had begun popping up one by one in the United States as well. Because people were still ignorant about the virus, sales on pork products were down, and people could be seen walking around town wearing white medical masks over their noses and mouths. It was hard to tell whether they were trying to avoid spreading or contracting the virus.

As with any flu outbreak, tension was high. We’d seen national stories about schools being shut down and elderly people dying of pneumonia. Because we hadn’t previously had any locally recorded cases, our station had been focusing on preventative measures by doing how-to packages featuring the proper method for hand washing and covering saliva-spraying sneezes. The fact that a case had sprung up in Washoe County
meant we could expect a community-wide panic to begin the moment the news hit the airwaves. Bob and the other station managers were giddy over the opportunity to exploit swine flu as much as they could. After all, swine flu in Reno was a Sheila story like no other. I knew from experience in pandering to Sheila that nothing got a stay-at-home mother squirming more than germs or illness.

“There is no need for fear or hysteria,” said Judy Davis, the public information officer for the Washoe County Health Department. She was standing in front of a group of ten or more reporters, each of us hooked up to a spider web of wires, cords, and microphones. Radio crews crouched down in front so as not to get in the way of the television lenses, and newspaper reporters lingered on the periphery, their telltale white spiral notebooks in hand.

“So far, there is only one confirmed case of the H1N1 virus in Washoe County, and with proper measures, we are hoping to keep the spread to a minimum. Keep in mind that in normally healthy people, this virus is nothing more than a common flu. Within a few days, symptoms usually have ceased and the person has a full recovery. I am happy to take your questions now.”

Before Judy could take a breath, camera flashes lit up her face and questions began flying at her from every direction, like misguided paper airplanes. Can you tell us who has the first case? Isn’t it true that pregnant women are most at risk for dying? What is the local government doing to keep the virus from spreading? Who has already been exposed to this terrifying illness? I considered asking a question as well, but my fellow reporters had beat me to the punch, and plus, Judy’s answers were solid. I didn’t feel any need to grill her further.
Taking the questions in order, she attempted to get her obviously rehearsed message across to the reporters.

“Again, this is no time to panic,” Judy reassured us, looking directly into our cameras. “In order to avoid any unnecessary investigating on your part, we would also like to announce that the first swine flu case in Washoe County was in detected in a two-year-old girl. She was diagnosed a few days ago, and already, her parents say they’re seeing vast improvements.”

Again, the questions flew. Does the child have siblings? Was the child in daycare? How many kids could have been exposed? What is the daycare doing to properly clean and prevent the spread of infection? What’s her name? I didn’t say a word.

Judy cleared her throat and began.

“Well obviously, we cannot release the name of the patient due to privacy laws, but the owner of the daycare the baby attends is here to speak on behalf of her facility. I’d like to introduce Lisa Munson, the owner of Fundamentals Preschool on North Virginia Street. Lisa, thanks for being here today.”

A middle-aged woman with dirty-blond hair and fluffy bangs stepped up to the podium and began to speak quickly and confidently.

“Hello, I’m Lisa, and I have owned Fundamentals Preschool for seven years. I hold a master’s degree in early childhood education, and I’ve been in the childcare business for more than twenty years. It was brought to my attention yesterday that one of my students had contracted the H1N1 virus, which is being widely referred to as swine flu. The baby is on the mend, and none of my other students are showing any symptoms
at this time. Immediately upon learning of our sick student, we thoroughly disinfected and cleaned all of the toys, furniture, and playground equipment at the facility. We also notified parents right away so they could keep an eye on their children in case any symptoms popped up. Unfortunately, I am not going to be taking any questions at this time. Thank you,” she said, moving away from the podium and allowing Judy Davis to take her place.

“I would also like to add that the licensing record of Fundamentals Preschool is very good, and we have no plans to shut down the school,” said Judy.

Again, the flying questions. *How can we be sure our children are safe? Will there be an inspection of the facility to make sure no more germs are intact? Has the child or her family been to any local grocery stores or public parks lately? What about the germs they may have left behind?*

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. The health department had answered all of our questions, and the daycare owner had been more than forthcoming with information about her facility, so I didn’t understand why my colleagues were continuing to push the issue. It was the *flu*, not some deadly, flesh-eating bacteria. Sure, some people were at risk for death, but only the very young and very old. And we weren’t in a third-world country. We were in Reno, with two large hospitals in the center of town. There was no reason to start panicking. At that moment, I felt embarrassed to be standing among the gaggle of journalists.

“That will be all,” said Judy. “We will continue to update you on the number of cases as we receive word, and if necessary, we’ll hold another press conference in the next couple of days.”
The reporters from Channel 2 and Channel 4 flung their microphones over their shoulders and practically ran from the building. I had no doubt they were headed to Fundamentals Preschool to start interrogating parents as they dropped off and picked up their children. Their stories would give the school a bad reputation, scare the pants off Sheila, and make their news directors extremely proud. But instead of following their lead, I carefully coiled up the cord on my microphone and helped Darrell pack up his gear. I had made a promise to myself after the story about the meaning of Easter that I wouldn’t pander to Sheila by lying to her anymore. We too were going to do a story about Fundamentals Preschool, but I was determined to do it responsibly.

When we got to the facility, our rival stations were just finishing up. I watched as their photographers panned across a litter-strewn sidewalk in front of the daycare, and zoomed in on a leaf-filled gutter on the roof. They were trying to make the place look dirty so people would pull their children out of school and create an even bigger story. I listened to Channel 4’s newest, most naïve reporter ask a young mother if she planned to withdraw her son from the school in order to keep him away from the “diseased child.” I could hardly believe what I was hearing.

“Come on Darrell, I need to make a quick phone call,” I said, heading back toward our station news jeep.

I grabbed a coffee-stained, crumpled up telephone book off the backseat of the jeep and turned to the yellow pages. I found Fundamentals Preschool listed under “daycares” and dialed the number.

“Hi Lisa? Yes, this is Auburn Hutton from KOLO 8 News. I know you just finished up with a press conference, but I was wondering if you’d be willing to talk to me
privately on camera and perhaps give us a tour of your facility? I just figured local parents would feel more at ease if they actually got to see the inside of the daycare. Maybe it will—you know—calm their fears,” I said.

“Yeah sure, come on by,” she said lightly, catching me off guard.

“Oh—um—okay then! I’ll be there in an hour.”

I hung up the phone and shook my head slowly back and forth. Unbelievable, I thought. It was a Sheila story like no other, and I had just scored an interview with the daycare owner who knew the child infected with our county’s first swine flu case. It was a win-win for me. I got to appeal to the ideal demographic for KOLO, which I knew would make my bosses happy, and I got to give my viewers what they deserved: a look at the truth. This was my chance to both advance my career and finally do the right thing for Sheila. It was way too good to be true.

Darrell and I waited patiently in the car while our competitors finished collecting video. As we walked up to the front doors of the preschool, I smoothed my hair down with my palm and took a deep breath. Lisa Munson met us near the front entrance without a smile.

“Hi. Where would you like to set up?” she asked us.

“How about in a classroom?” I suggested, trying to match her tone.

We followed Lisa into a dimly lit room with dozens of foot-high miniature chairs and little pastel-colored Easter egg drawings hung around on corkboards. Evidence of tiny people was littered throughout the room; short sinks, step stools, and mini handprints on paper in red paint. I hadn’t even started asking questions yet, and already I was feeling overly sentimental.
“Anywhere you like,” said Lisa, as she flipped one of the mini chairs backwards and straddled it.

Once Darrell had the gear in place, he quickly pushed the ‘on’ button and began rolling. I squatted down in front of Lisa and attempted to sit properly in one of the tiny chairs just opposite her. Smiling sweetly, I began.

“So Lisa, why don’t you begin by telling me about the little girl who has been diagnosed with swine flu?”

“Well, she’s a typical two-year-old,” she answered, laughing. “She’s sweet, she’s curious, she’s strong willed. And unfortunately, she’s being exploited by the local media. I’m sorry, but it’s true. This little girl contracted the flu. This is not groundbreaking. My students get the flu almost every year, and that’s not news. But just because there is a new strain of the illness this flu season—and I can only assume this is paired with a shortage of interesting news stories—now suddenly everyone seems to want to treat this child like some kind of leper. It’s the flu,” she said again, raising her eyebrows.

I felt immediately ashamed and silly as I sat across from this woman who obviously had a passion for children and for her job. There I was in my fancy suit and my high heels, more worried about the way I looked than about a sick and innocent baby who my colleagues were trying to expose. I guess I too couldn’t help but get caught up in the media frenzy.

“Go on, please,” I said, shifting uncomfortably in the tiny seat, and uncrossing my legs.

“That’s really all I have to say,” said Lisa, leaning in toward me. She put her hand on my knee. “It’s not your fault. I understand that you are all just doing your jobs, but I
just don’t see why this story has become so blown out of proportion. There really is no need to scare parents even more than they already are. It’s just the flu.”

I breathed all the air out of my lungs and sat nervously on my hands.

“You’re right,” I said. “I’m sorry for wasting your time. You already answered all of the questions I was going to ask you at the press conference, so there’s really nothing else I need. Can you just show me around the place so we can get some B-roll for our story? We’ll be out of your hair in no time.”

“Absolutely, follow me,” said Lisa, hopping up from the tiny chair and replacing underneath the tiny table in front of her.

We spent the next twenty minutes following Lisa around the spotless daycare facility as she showed us the sanitary measures her employees had taken to ensure the spread of swine flu was kept to a minimum. I even gathered an interview with the mother of a student at Fundamentals Preschool who said she thought the hype about swine flu was “overrated” and that she had no intention of pulling our baby out of the class. As we collected video of hand sanitizer, bleach bottles and disinfectant spray, I couldn’t help but feel guilty about the types of stories I knew my competitors were going to air. They’d only gotten one side of the story. People were afraid of illness, and they’d capitalized on that by instilling fear into their viewers about this new strain of flu that was really no different than any other flu from any other year in the past.

That night on our evening newscast, I thought about Sheila as I looked into the camera and confidently delivered my lines. Lisa allowed me to do a live shot from inside one of her playrooms. Behind me were dozens of disinfected plastic toys laying out to dry on clear blue tarps. As I looked directly at Sheila, I reassured her that there was no reason
to panic over the new flu strain. I showed her that daycares such as the Fundamentals Preschool were doing everything in their power to keep the spread to a minimum. I was proud of my story, because I knew deep down that everything I said was completely true, and Sheila deserved that.

Within a week or two, the hype over swine flu had died down. After the initial scare, dozens more cases of the H1N1 flu strain were detected, and then hundreds more, and then thousands. Eventually, the Washoe County Health District stopped counting, and people finally began to see swine flu for what it really was: the flu. Just like any big, leading story, the swine flu had exhausted its five minutes in the spotlight. Besides, it wasn’t long until an even bigger story hit the airwaves. And this story made Sheila’s initial concerns about swine flu seem trivial in comparison. The dry spell had officially ended.
Pepper spray flew off the shelves that year. After the murder, it was nearly impossible to find a can of it in Reno. Local women were so afraid to leave their homes unprotected that they bought two, three, even four cans at a time. Even I bought some, just in case the murderer was following the local news stories and wanted revenge against whoever was spreading information about the crime. The small red leather case made me feel safer on my walks out to my car after work each evening, although I knew I wasn’t his type anyway. According to police, the killer liked petite brunette women. They said he was a “sexual deviant,” which sounded bad enough, but it was only a matter of time before law enforcement officers rebranded him as a “domestic terrorist.”

It was a snowy Monday morning in January of 2008. I got to work about ten minutes early that day, which was standard practice for me. I had dressed warm and comfortable, assuming that I’d be assigned to stand out on a highway somewhere and get pelted by snowflakes while I updated locals on the storm. So I was taken by surprise when I showed up to a frantic newsroom.

“We’ve got a breaker,” my assignment editor, Scott Howard, said to me as I breezed past his desk. “A girl went missing on Saturday night and they still haven’t found her.” A photo of a petite brunette fluttered between his fingers.

“Juicy,” I said, “Let me see her.”

The missing girl was actually a young woman: 19-year-old college coed, Brianna Denison. The photo showed an obvious high school graduation portrait, a fresh-faced Brianna with long, center-parted straight hair pulled over both sides of her face and resting near her elbows.
“She’s gorgeous,” I said to Scott, handing back the photograph.

“She’s sooooo hot,” shouted one of the sportscasters, followed by mumbles of agreement from just about every male in the newsroom.

The reporter who had been on the case that weekend was Joe Harrington, a spiky-haired goody two-shoes from Ukiah, California. Joe was competitive, and it was clear he was annoyed that he’d have to hand over the reins on such a big story. Nevertheless, he filled me in on the latest. “Apparently, she was out partying with her friends near the university on Saturday night and went to bed on the couch. In the morning, she was gone. The police don’t know for sure what happened, but they do suspect foul play.”

*Foul play.* It was a little piece of “cop-speak” that I never fully trusted. Sometimes foul play turned out to be nothing more than a rebellious off teenager who ran away from home. Other times, it meant domestic violence gone awry. But once in awhile, *foul play* meant cold-blooded murder.

Darrell and I pulled up to the tiny orange home on Mackay Way sometime after 10:00 in the morning. Black and white patrol cars lined the street on both sides, and officers bundled in heavy snow gear searched every inch of the area. I watched as a sergeant lifted a trashcan lid and peered carefully inside. Another patrolman knocked on doors, questioning the perplexed-looking residents.

Darrell slowly pulled the news jeep to a stop, parking it as far out of the way as he could, given the swarm of cop cars that filled the street.

“I’m going to grab some video while you start asking around,” he said to me. “I don’t want to miss all the action.” He nodded in the direction of the front door on the orange house. A forensic detective appeared to be dusting for fingerprints on the glass
panes near the doorknob. Darrell got his equipment out of the back just in time for a few last minute shots of the detective at work. From there, he disappeared around the corner to shoot some K-9 dogs sniffing out a trail behind the house.

I wrapped my scarf tighter around my neck as I stepped out on to the curb. My boots sank ankle-deep into the fluffy snow as I struggled to see through the thick flurries. The first thing I noticed was that none of our competitor stations seemed to be on scene, which meant one of two things: Either we were first to arrive that day, or we were very, very late. Hoping we hadn’t already missed out on essential video and interviews, I set out to start asking questions.

“Excuse me, can you tell me what’s going on here?” I asked the first officer I saw, a young sergeant who looked not much older than me.

“Talk to the boss,” he said, pointing toward a familiar face in a black trench coat.

It was Detective Jon Catalano, a longtime investigator with the Reno Police Department, and a man with whom I’d had some negative run-ins in the past. He did not look like he wanted to be bothered.

“Detective, hi, how are you today?” I asked, running up to him with my reporter’s pad in one hand and a ballpoint pen in the other. He held a clipboard tightly to his chest, like a shield meant to keep nasty reporters from getting too close.

“Good morning, sir. Look, I know you are very busy, but I wondered if you can just give me the latest details on this case?”

“You’re going to have to wait, Auburn. I’m swamped, and this case is still under investigation. We’ll be sending out a press release this afternoon.”

“Can you at least tell me why you suspect foul play?”
“There was evidence inside the residence that leads us to believe that a violent act took place here,” he said, being purposely vague. “That’s all I can say right now. I’ve got to get back to work.” Detective Catalano walked away quickly, not giving me enough time to ask another follow up question.

“Thanks for nothing,” I said almost silently to myself as I set off to find Darrell.

His tripod was set up on the corner of Mackay and University, snow piled up at least twelve inches on each of the three legs. Darrell was in the middle of what looked like a great shot. Slowly panning from the Mackay home, he stopped the camera and adjusted the focus on an old telephone pole standing inches in front of the lens. There, a missing poster was pinned up for Brianna Denison:

MISSING

Name: Brianna Zunino Denison

Age: 19

DOB:

Height: 4’11”

Weight: 98 pounds

If you have any information,

please call Secret Witness at 322-4900.

The photo on the poster was different than the one Scott had shown me in the newsroom. This one was a candid shot of Brianna, taken the night of her disappearance. It looked like it had been cropped from a larger scene, her radiant smile and flawless skin
reflecting back into the camera. Brianna Denison looked like the all-American college student. She could have been just about anyone’s sister, daughter or friend. Looking at the photo made me realize that this story wasn’t one that would appeal just to Sheila, but that just about everyone in our city, state and region was going to be glued to it until the end. For once, it was real, legitimate news.

“This is crazy,” I said. “I wonder what happened to her.”

We spent the next hour knocking on doors, asking neighbors if they’d seen or heard anything suspicious that weekend. None of them seemed to have a clue. Most of the people who lived on the street were college students living in smelly hovels, their windows covered with tie-dyed sheets, beer cans lining their porch railings.

“I think a group of girls lives there,” revealed one neighbor, a shaggy-haired male student wearing a Wolfpack T-shirt from that year’s civil war game.

“No, sorry. I just moved in.”

I handed him my business card and told him to call me if he heard anything about what happened.

“Will do.”

Other neighbors we spoke with were less friendly; many just shut the door in our faces once they realized why we were there. Some simply informed us that they didn’t know anything about the crime or didn’t want to get involved. After knocking on dozens of doors and learning very little, Darrell and I trudged back to the front of the house on Mackay, ready to give up and head back to the station.
“What about her?” said Darrell, nodding his head toward a disheveled blonde who was getting out of a car twenty feet or so from where we were standing. The girl looked like she’d been crying, and her dirty sweatpants were evidence of a rough night. She made brief eye contact with me and I jumped at the chance.

“Hi there, sorry to bother you. My name is Auburn Hutton, and I’m with KOLO 8 News. I was wondering, is this your house? I’d love to ask you a couple of questions, if it’s okay with you.”

The girl glanced back at an older woman who was locking the car door behind her, presumably her mother.

“Mom, is it okay?” she asked.

“It’s up to you, KT,” replied the mother.

“Yeah, I guess. Come on in,” said KT, who shuffled up to the front of the house, opening the front door with a key and letting herself in.

I followed her, noticing a few patrol officers nearby raising their eyebrows in disgust. A Chihuahua greeted us at the door, barking frantically and running circles around our ankles. I didn’t waste any time.

“Why don’t you have a seat on the bar stool?” I suggested, motioning to Darrell with a flick of my head.

She sat, picking up the dog and stroking it while she got adjusted. Darrell quickly set up a shot on KT, blasting a bright 800-watt light in her face, making her tears glisten and drawing attention to the redness in her skin. He hooked a microphone to the neck of her powder blue sweatshirt and nodded at me.

“I’m rolling,” he said.
“Okay, can you please spell your first and last name?”

“Sure, It’s K-T, like the letters, and my last name is Hunter. H-U-N-T-E-R.”

“Okay KT, I assume you live here?” I asked her, leaning in gently toward her.

“Yes,” she replied, letting out a deep breath and a tiny sob.

“What happened to Brianna Denison?”

“I don’t know,” she wailed. “Someone took my friend.”

“Okay, calm down. Just start from the beginning.”

She took another deep breath, closing her eyes and squeezing out a giant teardrop.

“Brianna is my best friend. She goes to school in Santa Barbara, but she was in town visiting for winter break, so we went out last night. We got home late and she was sleeping on that couch right there. But this morning when I woke up, she was gone. I don’t know what happened,” she said, sobbing uncontrollably.

I nodded my head. “KT, I have to ask, were you drinking?”

“No KT, you don’t have to answer that,” interrupted her mom. KT glanced at her mom, and then back at me. She shook her head noncommittally.

“All right, that’s okay,” I reassured her. “You don’t have to answer any questions that make you uncomfortable. So what happened when you went to bed? And when did you notice she was gone?”

KT did her best to suppress her tears while she explained what happened. “We went to bed at probably 4:00 or 5:00 in the morning, and Brianna went to sleep on that couch.” KT pointed at a worn, tan leather couch that was scooted up against the living room wall, just feet from the glass front door. “I went to sleep in the bedroom with our
other girlfriend, and the door was closed. This morning at 9:00 when I came out here, she was gone.”

“Did she leave anything behind?”

KT could barely compose herself at this point.

“Yes, she left everything: her shoes, her purse, her cell phone. She didn’t even have a jacket on, and it’s freezing outside. And there was blood on the pillow.”

“Blood? How much blood?”

“Just three little drops,” said KT. “She also had a teddy bear with her, and that’s missing too.”

I breathed out deeply, frantically taking notes and trying to compose my thoughts.

“What did the police tell you?” I asked her.

“Nothing really, but I know something bad happened to her. She wouldn’t just disappear like this. Brianna was the sweetest person, the nicest, most genuine girl,” she said between sobs. “I don’t know why anyone would want to hurt her. I can’t understand why someone would just come in here and take my friend.”

I wrapped up the interview after getting a few more logistical details from KT on camera. She told me who the girls had spent their evening with, how they’d gotten home, and how Brianna had been text messaging back and forth with her jealous boyfriend just before she’d gone to bed. I knew I had enough sound bites for a really great, emotional piece. I thanked KT, handed her my business card, and headed back to the station.

By the time we got to the newsroom, police detectives had already sent out another press release with more information about evidence they’d uncovered in their initial investigation. They’d already ruled out the jealous boyfriend as a suspect since
he’d been in another state when the crime occurred. Brianna didn’t have any known
enemies, and everyone she had encountered during her evening out with friends had been
cleared with strong alibis. Police said they believed Brianna had been sexually assaulted
and abducted by a stranger, a man who had likely entered the home on Mackay Way
through the unlocked front door. Saliva and blood evidence left behind all pointed to this
conclusion, and police were warning young women to be extra vigilant. They were also
linking Brianna’s disappearance to a prior, separate sexual assault that had taken place
near the university only a month before. In that case, the victim had gotten away from her
captor and filed a report. Police believed the same man was responsible for both crimes.

I was completely shocked by what police told us, and I felt confident that my
story and interview with KT Hunter would be an appropriate warning to the community
as a whole. I also knew that the story I was covering was going to be huge, perhaps the
biggest story of my career. It could be the catalyst for my move up to a bigger market, if
played my cards right. But I had to stay focused. Immediately, my thoughts turned to
Sheila. What would she think when she heard the news? Would she lock her doors and
hide her daughters? Would she live in fear, or would she feel empowered to protect
herself from predators? I couldn’t predict exactly how Sheila and the rest of the
community were going to react to a story of this magnitude, but I knew I was in deep.
My full-fledged commitment to following the Brianna Denison case began on that snowy
day in January, and it lasted for two long years. And throughout every moment of my
journey, my mind stayed on Sheila.
I met Sheila dozens of times over the next two years. At a search party for Brianna Denison, I talked to her as she pushed a baby carriage along a dirt path, scanning the bushes and creek beds for evidence. At Brianna’s candlelight memorial, I interviewed Sheila as she placed a single red rose next to the cross where Brianna’s body was discovered. I even spoke to her in court after the arrest had been made. She was there for moral support, despite the fact that she had no relation or connection to Brianna’s family.

None of these women were actually named Sheila, but they were just as I imagined her. They were middle-aged, stay-at-home mothers who loved their children and their community. These women were devastated when Brianna disappeared, and so they followed the case closely from the very start. Wanting desperately to reach out to Brianna’s mother and shield her from the pain, they did the next best thing: they volunteered to help solve the murder. Tying blue ribbons (Brianna’s favorite color) around trees and fence posts all over the Truckee Meadows, they kept their eyes peeled for men who matched the description released by detectives.

A few months after Brianna’s disappearance, another young woman came forward and reported that she too had been sexually assaulted. Her case only escalated the fear that was spreading in our community. The victim claimed a man had raped her at gunpoint in the parking garage at the university just two months before Brianna vanished. So far, that made three rapes, two sexual assaults and one murder. And to top it all off, police said they believed the man responsible was still living openly and freely among us.

Unlike the sensationalized warnings about preventing the spread of swine flu, I remember thinking the stories we aired about the serial rapist and killer seemed genuine
and completely necessary. The fact was, there was a very brazen and violent man roaming in our community, and police feared he would soon rape or kill again if the proper warnings weren’t issued. It was one of the rare times as a journalist when I truly felt my presence on the air was of great value to the community. In a time when local women felt afraid to leave their homes alone, I helped to keep them informed and up to date on the progress of the case. We even gave women self-defense tips and advice on how to protect themselves.

At this point in my career, Sheila and I had become inseparable. I couldn’t do a single news package without first thinking about how Sheila was going to react to it. While part of me was focused on doing the public (especially Sheila) a service by keeping them up to date on the case, the other part of me was ecstatic to have landed a story that had the potential to give me the national exposure I craved. My own success and career growth was directly tied to my dedication to Sheila. I was no longer interested in pandering to her with depthless stories about trivial things, but I was determined to closely scrutinize the Brianna Denison case until it was closed. I knew that’s what Sheila needed if she was ever going to feel safe again. And I knew it’s what I needed if I was ever going to get out of Reno and start getting the pay and appreciation I felt I deserved.

From the very first day Brianna went missing, Sheila and her family were obsessed with the story. In fact, everyone seemed to be interested. Our station’s website became a sounding board for local chatter about the case. Thousands of comments and questions about the murder were posted on the site, and according to station management, our ratings were up. National news teams also came to Reno to cover the case, and reporters from crime shows like Nancy Grace camped outside the Reno police station to
deliver updates. Our station ignored the mundane informational press conferences and events for weeks, focusing all of our efforts on the Brianna Denison murder mystery. Every single newscast contained a solid ten minutes or so of Brianna coverage, forcing us to come up with new and creative angles on a daily basis. This was partly self-serving, since we wanted Sheila to stay interested enough to keep watching, but it was also a way to keep local women informed about the status of their own safety. Over time though, the Brianna coverage grew stale. As with all big news stories, eventually, viewers grew restless and bored. Fortunately, they didn’t have to wait long for a major break in the case.

It had been nearly a month since Brianna had gone missing, and there was still no sign of her body or her killer. Police were assuming the worst at that point, but they didn’t have much new information to release. Our station’s viewers and online followers began to grow hostile. They no longer wrote notes of condolence to Brianna’s family, but instead they wrote nasty, anonymous posts that criticized the media for continuing to air updates about the young woman’s disappearance. Many people complained that the only reason the news media had stuck with the story for so long was because Brianna Denison was white, rich and beautiful. Even I had to admit, that thought had crossed my mind. Were we all obsessed with this case because of the way Brianna looked? Maybe. But then again, there was a real news element to this case. A rapist and murderer was on the loose. It was crucial that the community remain alert. The fact that Brianna was also beautiful made the case appealing to both our audience as well as our station managers who were hoping to capitalize on the story.
By that time, our competing television stations had begun to cover other local news aside from the Brianna Denison mystery. Drug busts, car chases and politics began leading their newscasts, followed by brief updates on Brianna. But despite the fact that the story was at a stand still, I continued to cover it relentlessly. I had begun to feel a sense of ownership over the story, and after spending many weeks interviewing Sheila after Sheila, each of them tearing up as they begged for Brianna’s safe return to her family, I felt I owed it to these women to see the story through to closure. I decided to ignore the nasty emails and the critics who were sick of hearing about Brianna Denision, and instead, focus on pleasing the Sheilas who were interested and watching closely. Although the story may have grown stale for some viewers, it wasn’t long until a break in the case changed many of their minds. On February 15th, 2008, police announced the discovery of Brianna’s body. After that, even the critics seemed interested in the story once again.

I didn’t get to the crime scene until late in the afternoon. It was a sunny, crisp day, and the snow that had fallen all winter long was finally beginning to melt and expose the bare ground underneath. Our main anchor, Pat, called me on my cell phone as I was heading back to the station to put together that day’s story. I had planned on doing a reflective piece on several other unsolved missing person’s cases in our area, but the news of Brianna’s body being discovered was obviously going to take precedence.

I parked the news jeep next to our station’s yacht-sized satellite truck and grabbed my reporter’s notebook and a microphone off the seat next to me. I was in a South Reno industrial complex and looking out over a field of sagebrush and spotty snow. About twenty detectives, forensics investigators and police officers were standing
in a large circle on the north end of the field, each of them looking down somberly. It was as though there was a funeral taking place in the field that day, and in a way, there was. Dick Gammick, the Washoe County District Attorney, was pacing back and forth just outside the circle while talking to someone on his cell phone. That alone was enough to tell me that Brianna Denison had surely been murdered. Yellow crime tape surrounded the entire field and the frontage roads surrounding it, keeping the reporters and the public out. Because I had stayed on the story for so many weeks, I had become friendly with Brianna Denison’s aunt, Lauren Denison. I knew that this was the moment I was expected to put on my die-hard reporter hat and call her. There was no doubt in my mind that my competitors at the other stations were doing this very thing, but I still somehow felt incredibly guilty about disturbing her during what had to be one of the most difficult days of her life. Despite how I felt about what had to be done, I knew that if I failed to call the victim’s family, I was going to have some serious explaining to do when I got back to the station. Plus, despite the devastation that Brianna and her family were probably experiencing at that very moment, they also needed the media to keep Brianna’s story fresh in the minds of the public so that local residents would keep looking for a suspect who matched the description released by police. And I needed a heavy-hitting murder case to add to my resume tape if I was ever going to advance in my career. Despite this fact, I still wished I could give Brianna’s family at least a little time to process the news. But I knew that time was something a deadline-chasing reporter didn’t have. Reluctantly, I dialed Lauren’s number. She answered on the first ring.

“This is Lauren,” she said, through sniffles.
“Hey Lauren,” I replied softly. “It’s Auburn. Look, I’m really sorry to call you right now, but um, I’m sure you’ve heard—“

“It’s okay Auburn. Yes, we’ve been talking with police all afternoon. It’s Brianna they found.”

“I’m so sorry, Lauren. I do hate to bother you with this right now. I’m sure you and your family need time to grieve, but I am hoping we could schedule an interview with you just as soon as you feel ready to talk about it. No rush. What do you think?”

“Um, yes Auburn, that would be fine. We just need a little time to sort out our thoughts and figure out where to go from here. I’ll be in touch tomorrow, okay?”

“Sure, absolutely,” I said. “Thanks Lauren, and again, I’m really sorry for your loss.”

“Thank you,” she said, and hung up.

She was a strong woman, that was for sure. I was taken aback at how she handled my intrusive phone call, and no doubt dozens of others that came before and after. At that point, she and the rest of the Denison family had probably become immune to rude interruptions to their sorrow. The only thing that reassured me was knowing that the Denison family needed the reporters almost as much as we needed them. Without the media, Brianna’s case would have almost zero chance of ever being solved. Pocketing my cell phone, I headed over to the gaggle of reporters lingering just outside the crime tape perimeter. None of us said a word. We just stared out into the field, wondering what exactly the investigators were looking at on the ground in front of them. Something deep in my stomach told me that whatever it was, it was gruesome. I felt a light tap on my shoulder.
“Hey Auburn, Pat told me to let you know there’s an updated press release back at the station. Give him a call and he’ll brief you on it. Prepare to go live at 5:00 and 6:30,” said Wade Barnett, our satellite truck operator.

“Okay, thanks Wade.”

I spent a few more moments collecting my thoughts and looking out into the sagebrush before calling Pat for details. The press release explained how a man who worked in the industrial park had been out on a walk during his lunch break when he came across the body of a young woman. Brianna Denison’s frozen body was naked except for a single turquoise sock, thrown into a ditch in the field, and then carelessly covered up with an abandoned Christmas tree. By the time the man found her, wild animals had devoured much of her face, leaving her mostly unrecognizable. Next to the body, there was a pair of black women’s thong underwear that police said did not belong to Brianna. The man told detectives that at first glance, he wasn’t entirely sure if the body was a real person or a mannequin. Investigators said they believed Brianna’s body had been in the field for at least a month, which meant it was most likely thrown there the same night she had disappeared on January 20th. Because there was a heavy storm that weekend, she’d been covered up in snow and preserved until the sun came out weeks later and exposed her.

“This is heavy,” I said under my breath before hanging up the phone and preparing my notes. It sickened me to think about what this young woman had gone through prior to her body being ditched in a field. We’d probably never know for sure.

That night, I was live on the air dozens of times during our three evening newscasts, and I stayed late at the station to compile information on the case for follow-
up stories. I thought about Sheila, and how the story was going to anger and sadden her. I thought about how she’d want to protect her own daughters from the type of suffering Brianna had most likely gone through the night of her death. Police hadn’t made any arrests at that point, and they didn’t have any solid suspects either. All they had to go on was a composite sketch of a 20-something white male with a cold, sterile look in his eyes. If police were ever to find him, I suspected that Sheila would want him to fry.

It was just a few days before Thanksgiving when the next big break came in the case. For months, police had been eliminating potential suspects by comparing their DNA samples with the DNA left at the home on Mackay Way, as well as DNA found on Brianna’s body and the pair of black thong underwear. Everyone seemed to be looking over their shoulders, wondering if the murderer was someone they knew. Local women turned in their boyfriends and husbands, fearing that their resemblance to the composite sketch was just too eerie. Some men even turned themselves in, hoping to eliminate the long stares and scowls they received from their neighbors, at work, and in grocery stores. But not one of these men’s DNA turned out to be a match. There was only one man who perfectly fit the description and genetic makeup.

Local construction worker James Michael Biela was arrested in late November of 2008. We were all ready to give up on the case ever being solved, and then miraculously, it happened. Police said the girlfriend of the 27-year-old former Marine turned him in after she found a pair of thong underwear in the center console of his truck. The woman allowed forensics investigators to test the DNA of the four-year-old son she shared with James Biela, confirming that the father of the child was indeed the perpetrator in the crime. When the news broke, the community erupted. Our station was live on the air for
hours as we continued to learn more about James Biela and his motivations for raping and killing.

After the Thanksgiving holiday was over, James Biela appeared in court and pleaded not guilty to his crimes. He looked every bit the typical 27-year-old family man, despite the orange jumpsuit and shackles: spiky blonde hair, bright blue eyes, a substantial beer gut, and a fearful look in his eyes. Once James’ picture hit our airwaves, Sheila became full of rage, ready to make James suffer the same way his victims did. Once again, the comments on our station website became hostile. The women who commented on the story didn’t say they were hoping for “justice” or a “fair trial.” Instead, they said they wanted James Biela’s testicles in a vice. They said they wanted to rape him, choke him, beat him, and then let him burn in hell.

And Sheila wasn’t the only one who was worked up over the case. We received hundreds of emails and website comments from locals—some Sheila-types, some not—who said they felt the media’s coverage of the Brianna Denison murder was over the top and biased. People wanted to know why we’d focused so much attention on this case, but not on other similar murder cases in the past. Only a year prior to Brianna’s disappearance, a UNR professor named Judy Calder had gone missing. Later, her body was discovered in a field in rural Nevada with stab wounds in her chest. The story was only top news for a week or so before getting buried by other more action-packed pieces. Our station covered the trial of Judy Calder’s murderer, but the other two stations ignored it. Sheila and our other viewers wanted to know why the death of an elderly woman wasn’t as big of a news story as the death of a beautiful young college coed. Perhaps Sheila felt angry that there was so much airtime devoted to the death of a young woman,
when she knew the story wouldn’t have received nearly as much hype if the woman had been middle-aged, unattractive and less affluent.

Other website comments were accusatory, claiming that Brianna Denison “had it coming.” People wrote that they believed if Brianna Denison hadn’t been out drinking and wearing provocative clothing the night she disappeared, then she wouldn’t have been raped and killed. I cringed as I read these comments, hoping that Brianna’s family hadn’t read them too. My sympathy was two-sided: I felt bad for the Denisons, who had to endure the sadness of losing Brianna, topped off by the cruelty of people bad-mouthing Brianna after her death. But I also felt sorry for Sheila, who probably couldn’t help but believe that if she had been raped, strangled and ditched in a field, that maybe no one would have cared.

My observations of Sheila and the other viewers commenting our website led to an epiphany of sorts. The woman the media consultants had labeled as Sheila wasn’t the apathetic viewer they made her out to be. The woman I saw was engaged, aware, and actively questioning the news content displayed before her. So perhaps Sheila wasn’t as ignorant of news bias as the marketing consultants had hoped. While the big-wigs with Grey Broadcasting told us Sheila was a nitwit who would believe anything we aired, maybe they were wrong. But even so, Sheila continued to stay glued to the murder case, despite some of the anger she voiced over the unbalanced coverage. Maybe her reasons for watching stemmed partly from her commitment to seeing justice run its course, and partly from her resentment toward the media. While it bothered me to think that I was partly responsible for Sheila’s displeasure with the coverage of the Brianna Denison murder, this realization didn’t deter me from wanting to do my job. In fact, it only
motivated me more. At that point in my career, I was contemplating the idea leaving my job as a KOLO reporter and going back to graduate school, so I decided I would spend my final days practicing my craft in the most ethical, fair and responsible manner possible.

The date for James Biela’s trial was set for May of 2010. The public defenders assigned to represent him were granted several extensions in order to prepare. Because the prosecution announced they’d be seeking the death penalty as a punishment for Biela, the defense said they needed as much time as possible to get their testimony in order. And while the attorneys gathered witnesses and evidence, I began to seriously contemplate leaving my position as a journalist. My personal life had changed drastically in the two years since Brianna went missing, and the case had brought to light some undesirable elements of broadcast news, elements I could no longer overlook. In those 24 months, I had purchased a house, gotten married, and been accepted into graduate school. Much like Sheila, I was much more interested in homemaking than newscasting. My priorities had shifted in a major way.

In addition to the changes in my personal life, coverage of the Brianna Denison case had gotten out of hand. When Brianna first disappeared, it seemed as though most of the reporters assigned to the case had nothing but good intentions. Our stories were factual, concise, and full of important information for the community, and as a bonus, they were excellent material to add to our resume tapes. While many of us—myself included—may have had ulterior motives for our dedication to covering the murder case, our careers weren’t the only thing driving us. I for one was truly shocked and heartbroken over the death of a young person with so much potential. I hoped that my reporting would somehow help the justice system prevail.
But as time went on and the trial grew closer, the stories about Brianna Denison became more and more sensationalized. Other reporters began to lose sight of what was important. Even I was sometimes guilty of getting caught up in the frenzy. Eventually, the coverage seemed more like a competition than a public service. It was all about who could get the exclusive interview with Brianna’s mother, or who had the best shots of James Biela’s family in the courtroom. I was sick and tired of making decisions about stories based on what would most likely impress my boss or bring in the highest ratings. I wanted to do stories that helped people, not hurt them. More importantly, I wanted to give Sheila piece of mind that her community was safe again. The James Biela murder trial gave me that opportunity.
As the trial grew nearer, I continued to contemplate quitting my job and ending my career as a broadcast journalist. I felt like I was living a double life: one as a journalist, and one as a homemaker. But it wasn’t just the coverage of the Brianna Denison case that was weighing on my decision. Everything about my career began to bother me, and so I transformed into a chameleon of sorts. The first thing I did every night when I got home from work was to take off my face. To really get it clean, I started with a blast of scalding hot water. Cupping my hands like a praying mantis, I splashed the liquid over my forehead and cheeks, watching the eyeliner and mascara slowly melt away, leaving me looking gothic and raccoon-like. A few drops of makeup remover on a Q-tip, and once again, I was me.

As an on-air TV reporter, I often had to cake on more makeup than most circus clowns. When I put it on each morning, I became a version of myself that I wasn’t so sure I wanted to be anymore. When I took it off at night, I was transformed into the real me, the version of myself that I was starting to like the most. Deep down, I knew that it would take more than just a clean face to transform me from TV reporter to regular person. And while I often wanted nothing more than a normal life, being normal was also what I feared the most. If I was nothing but a homemaker, did that mean I was also a Sheila? It was a question I wasn’t sure I wanted the answer to. For the duration of my career as a reporter, whenever someone posed the question to me, “So what do you do?” my answer had always come easy.
“I’m a TV news reporter for Reno’s ABC affiliate,” I would say in a casual manner so as not to sound too cocky. Sometimes I even played it down and simply said, “I’m a journalist.”

Many people would ask, “Are you really on TV? Do people recognize you?” All questions I would casually answer with a yes. While it sometimes felt a little uncomfortable to admit to small-town fame, it could feel good too. As a TV reporter, I got to feel important everywhere I went. I got to schmooze with senators, gossip with B-list celebrities and shake hands with the mayor like an old friend. I could get VIP treatment at almost any nightclub, and I could park anywhere I wanted to, as long as I said I was ‘with the media.’

Aside from the Brianna Denison case, which had virtually taken over the airwaves at that point, our news station also covered every major party, festival or event that happened in Reno. I was at nearly every one of them, standing on the front lines, recording people’s reactions and secretly wishing I could be part of the crowd. Take opening day of the Reno’s first Triple-A baseball team, the Reno Aces. For months, I watched the gorgeous stadium rise from the ground up, brick by brick. At the first game, I could smell the kielbasa and fresh popcorn from where I stood outside the stadium gates. As thousands of people filed in, lawn chairs and umbrellas in hand, I stood my post. I watched with envy as sundress and shorts-clad couples laughed and joked with the sunlight hitting their faces. Every half hour, I gave an update from the curb.

“Well Sarah,” I said to our female anchor, “people really seem to be enjoying themselves. They’ve been waiting for this for more than a year and finally, the baseball dream in Reno has come true.”
What I really wanted to say was how excited I was about the baseball stadium, and how much I wanted to break through the steel grated fence separating me from it. I yearned to strip out of my suffocating TV reporter clothes, toss them into oncoming traffic, and sprint inside to meet my husband for the first pitch. These are the things in life I felt I was constantly missing out on. While a departure from broadcast journalism meant I would no longer benefit from the perks of the TV business, things like free haircuts and free iPhones, it also meant that for the first time in my adult career lifetime, I would get to be a spectator instead of a spectacle.

Even though I felt like I was constantly surrounded by people and activities, there was also a sort of loneliness to my chosen profession. While I was out covering the news, most “normal” people were out living their lives, spending time with old friends or making new ones. In the past ten years, I had moved eleven times. In each new city, I made a handful of new friends, most of whom I lost touch with a few months after I headed to my next new home. And many of the friendships I created were with other people in the news business. While it was convenient, I’m not sure I had much in common with these people other than our chosen careers. Many of these friends were what are referred to as “lifers” in the news business, people who couldn’t imagine themselves in any other career. They ate, slept, and breathed news, and when they weren’t at the station working on a newscast, they were hanging out with people from work, talking about news. As I considered quitting, I made a point to separate my news life from my home life, a change that was more difficult than I ever imagined.

Before I got married, I partied with my fellow TV journalists any chance I could. After a particularly stressful day at work, we’d all meet up at a local bar and drink beer
over conversations about news. We spent hours analyzing our stories, criticizing our boss and stroking each other’s egos.

“You’re a bazillion gagillion times prettier than Linda at Channel 2,” one of our reporters would say, her eyes beginning to droop as she nursed her Heineken.

“No, you’re wayyyyyyyyyy pwittier,” I’d slur.

I was perfectly happy mixing business with pleasure at that point, probably because I still thought this was the job I’d have for the rest of my life. But outside of TV station gossip, I didn’t have much to say to these work friends. And furthermore, all the partying was beginning to get to me. I grew tired of late nights followed by early morning breaking news stories. It had me beginning to worry if this type of reckless behavior is partly why some newscasters seem to age so quickly.

But even though I purposely distanced myself from the TV station crowd since my party days, there were a few special ones in the bunch that I planned to hold on to. After all, my fellow TV journalists and I were all in the same boat. We knew what it was like to be stared at and recognized in a grocery store. We had all dealt with the same broken equipment and bad sound bites. We all knew what it was like to crave the lead news slot, and to feel the adrenaline rush of a live shot at the scene of a breaking news story.

Some of my competitors at Channel 2 and Channel 4 had become my friends over the years. When there was a police standoff and the cops were staying tight-lipped, you could find us on the sidelines gossiping about what a bad interview so-and-so was, or how terrible the job market was for budding reporters. We complained about the things that only we could relate to, things like pushy news producers and interview subjects that
shuffled their feet in front of the camera. These TV bitch sessions and workplace friendships made my days on the job a lot more enjoyable. Deep down, I knew I’d miss these elements of my career if I left it.

But there were other things about being a reporter that I couldn’t wait to be done with. On holidays, my coworkers and I cheered each other up because if we didn’t, who would? I worked Christmas Day for five years straight. While most people were out playing with their new toys or building snowmen in their front yard, I was on the clock. I got to waste the holiday away so that the handful of people who actually watch the news on Christmas night could say, “Poor girl, I can’t believe they make those TV people work on holidays.”

While there were people at my station who I had grown to care about, I still didn’t completely trust any of them. As many times as we had consoled each other over cocktails, they still didn’t know who I considered to be the “real” me. Escaping from the TV crowd and my formerly chaotic lifestyle was partly how I ended up meeting my husband, Schuyler. A former editor at my station set me up on a blind date with Schuyler, which ended up being a complete nightmare. The editor and his girlfriend ended up in a huge fight and Schuyler and I were left to deal with the awkward fallout. But aside from a disastrous introduction, somehow we still ended up on a second date.

Six months later, we were engaged. I knew by date number two that he was the man I’d been waiting for since the first time I imagined myself walking down the aisle in a poofy, white dress. His dreams of having a family, a home and a balanced life were all the same dreams I had, but had nearly given up on. While we got to know each other, we talked at length about the foreign countries we’d visited, and the ones hoped to see together. We
discussed our families, our futures, and our fears. We learned to laugh at each other’s quirks and love each other’s faults. Until I met Schuyler, I thought my dream of being a big-market television reporter was the only thing that would truly make me happy. Before him, I put my career first and the relationships in my life second. It took the right man for me to realize I had my priorities all mixed up.

While Schuyler and I did not yet have kids at that time, we already had enough names picked out to call a small army in for supper. We already knew which room we would eventually furnish with a rocking chair and crib, and we based the practicality of our vehicles on whether or not they held a car seat. Schuyler, our Boston terrier, Moo and I were a team. On weekends, we rode bikes through the city, leaving a trail of crunchy leaves in our wake. Home improvement projects became our favorite pastimes, as we planted trees and pictured our children climbing them in ten years. We painted borders, cleaned out cobwebs, and built fences around the life we built together. When we needed a break, we often stopped by the dog park and threw tennis balls for Moo until she lay down in the grass and panted, her tiny bottom teeth poking out like a cartoon gremlin. Some weekend mornings at our favorite breakfast restaurant, PJ’s, Sky and I read each other’s minds.

“She’ll have the Morning Star sausage breakfast burrito and I’ll have one with bacon please,” he would say to the waitress.

While we waited for our food, we sometimes glossed over the local newspaper and complained about the cover story choices. Sky skimmed the sports page and I tried to steal his attention away by calling him funny nicknames and playing footsy under the table. If someone in the restaurant was talking too loudly or causing a scene, Sky and I
took one look at each other and knew what the other one was thinking. If he started to speak, I would finish his sentence.

“Did you hear—“

“—that lady talking about how much she loves Sarah Palin? Yeah, I heard her. What an idiot,” I’d interrupt.

These precious moments in my life helped me realize that career isn’t everything. I began to feel much more personal satisfaction from my home life than my work life. It was the special relationships that mattered to me the most, even more than the “relationship” I had built with Sheila. I realized then that my husband is my best friend, and that he comes first. When I hear good news or bad news, he’s the first person I want to talk to. From our very first date, he has never stopped opening doors for me, and fresh flowers grace always our coffee table, a constant reminder that I am married to a true gentleman. We value the same things in life, things that don’t necessarily involve fame or wealth or prestige. When we crawl into bed each night, his scratchy feet tickling mine, I feel like the luckiest person alive. As I contemplated my exit from broadcasting, I felt confident that even if I were to lose my looks, my voice, and my job on the air, Schuyler would still love me for me.

Aside from an amazing husband, I also found some solace in friendships I had made outside of the workplace. My running partner, Lindy, a dietician at a local hospital, doesn’t have the first clue about news coverage or TV ratings. On weekends, we ran together and talked about shopping, gardening or the latest episode of *Project Runway*. When we mentioned our jobs, it was only brief and in passing. Another friend, Heather, a sarcastic and snarky Oregonian, became the person I could talk to when it seemed like
no one else would listen. I often vented to her about my internal struggles at work, and she helped give me an outside perspective on my dilemma over whether or not I should quit. Like me, Heather usually spent her weekends doing arts and crafts, trying new recipes and improving her home. I realized I had more in common with Heather and Lindy than I did with all of my work and TV friends combined. We were all a lot like Sheila, but at the time, that thought didn’t cross my mind. I was just happy to have found friends with same values and interests that I had. Having that kind of outside support is what kept me sane.

The girlfriends I grew up with in Napa, California were another escape from TV life. They have always been like sisters to me, and in fact, it would be safe to say they know me better than some members of my own family. Freckle-faced Courtney is probably the funniest person I’ve ever met, and we would often end up laughing so hard we couldn’t breathe, our arms flailing behind us like air traffic controllers as we bent over and tried to compose ourselves. Jessica, my little redheaded dancing queen, is the one friend I have who is willing to give a straight and honest opinion about something, even when the truth hurts. And my dear friend Alexis is the silliest, ditziest, most naïve girl I know, yet she’s surprisingly smart when it comes to giving advice about life. While none of my Napa friends know the first thing about the news business or my small-town fame, they were always willing to listen when I needed to open up about my future plans. My friends knew me and loved me long before I stepped in front of a television camera, and I had no doubt they would be around for good.

For me, it was the simple things in life that I began to appreciate more than ever. Happiness to me was a glass of white wine, a great new recipe and my favorite tunes to
sway my hips to while I cooked Schuyler dinner. The only thing that got in the way of
this ritual was a breaking news story that kept me late at work. I can’t count how many
times a murder, a snowstorm or an undecided jury pool rudely interrupted my domestic
utopia, keeping me from what I wanted more than anything: to be a fabulous homemaker,
wife, and eventually, mother. I felt so much animosity toward my job at that time because
it stood in the way of my life.

I felt like I had become the type of person who is mediocre at doing lots of things,
but never really amazing at doing anything. I could sew, cook and garden, but my skills
were limited in all three. I could report, anchor and produce the news, but I knew I would
never be Walter Cronkite. I have always been a firm believer that if you try to do too
much at once, something will always suffer. It’s like when you’re rushing to finish
putting away the dishes while you chat on the phone and keep an eye on your baby in
other room. There’s a good chance you’ll break a plate. I was afraid that if I kept pushing
away my passions and dreams, I was going to break my spirit. When the chance to cover
a national news story would come up, it almost always coincided with the date of a good
friend’s wedding shower or birthday party. I missed out on so many important events
because I had a career that didn’t make exceptions for my personal life. I knew if I were
willing to give up my friends, my husband, my dog and my home, I could probably cut
my hair into a spiffy anchor bob and land a job in a bigger, higher-paying market. But
then I’d be alone and unhappy, wishing I had someone to come home to. I felt like I was
trying to pick between exploiting Sheila or becoming her. I knew I had to decide: do I
choose my career or do I choose my life? And why couldn’t I have both?
The kicker to this dilemma was that sometimes I could fit perfectly into both worlds. I was able to smile, put on my reporter face and speak intelligently and sincerely about nearly any topic I was assigned to. I could play the powerful career woman, sport the pointy high heels and come across like a true professional. On the other hand, I could also make a mean meatloaf, grow a killer tomato plant, and sew a lovely set of curtains for my living room. I loved babies, birthday parties and backyard sunsets, all things Sheila could relate to, but that successful TV reporters don’t always get off work in time to enjoy.

Since I started my career, everything I thought I wanted in life had changed. I thought being a TV journalist was the perfect job, but I didn’t realize that once the novelty wore off, it would also be the type of job that required me to live to work instead of work to live. I knew that I wanted to have a baby—or maybe two—and I didn’t want nannies and daycare providers to raise them. I knew it was possible for me to have a career and have children, but I also knew that either my job or my kids would suffer. I just wasn’t willing to make that type of sacrifice. It was beginning to become more and more clear to me how much I had in common with Sheila.

Aside from my personal debate over whether or not to quit, I knew there was a larger, societal debate as well. I worried whether my coworkers would think I’d gone soft if I suddenly dropped a promising career so I could stay home and change poopy diapers. Would they see me as a Sheila if I were at home watching the news instead of delivering it? I knew some women would think I was nuts, and they would probably even accuse me of turning back time a good fifty years or so. I had always thought of myself as a moderate feminist, so why was I considering such a bold move? I was strong, able and
hard working, and I had already proven that I certainly didn’t need a man to take care of me or make me feel whole. The issue was, I wanted those things. And on top of that, in my time spent in broadcasting, I had never seen a woman who had successfully balanced a career and a family. I had known women on both sides of the spectrum, but none of them had achieved middle ground. I remembered meeting a very successful investigative reporter during an internship I had served in the nation’s second largest news market, KTLA in Burbank, California. This particular reporter had a personal makeup artist and hairdresser, probably raked in at least a six-figure salary, and got to deliver news each evening to millions of viewers. She had truly made it. But this same woman who had done everything right in her career was severely lacking in her home life. She’d been divorced three times, couldn’t seem to hold down a steady boyfriend anymore, and had an eight-year-old son from her second marriage, a little boy she rarely ever saw. I remember her complaining at work about how the nanny who took care of her son was more of a mother to him than she was. But despite these complaints, she didn’t change her work schedule or give up her fame in order to be a better mother. She was committed to her job, so her family life seemed to take the backseat. On the other side of the spectrum, many of the mothers I worked with over the years were some of the least successful reporters, anchors and producers I came into contact with. Most of them had promising futures in broadcasting, but once they had children, they became tired, distracted, and disheveled on the air. Often times they started by cutting their hours down to part-time in order to spend more time with their children. When that wasn’t enough, eventually they just quit for good. I didn’t want to be either of these women, and I knew that meant that I had to choose.
But even with all of the complaints I had about my job, quitting was still terrifying. I kept worrying that if I quit and then realized I had made a mistake, that I would never be able to get my job or my dignity back. It works like this: You’re either in or you’re out of the TV business; there is no in between. It’s like an exclusive club where only the members speak the language and know the lingo. Anytime someone quit the business, it seemed like everyone in our newsroom began to treat that person like a traitor. When we saw them out at functions, we either ignored them or gossiped about them. We acted as though they somehow failed in life because they left the journalism profession, like they were somehow inferior because they couldn’t handle the pressure that we mightier broadcasters were capable off. Looking back, I now wonder if maybe we acted that way because we were jealous of their freedom. Maybe we did it to protect ourselves from the realization that we were actually the weaker bunch since we didn’t have the guts to do the same thing.

I made the plunge in April of 2010. I was already assigned to cover the James Biela murder trial, and there was no way I was going to let someone else have the glory of finishing up what I had started. I walked into our news director’s office looking confident, but feeling anything but. By that time, Bob Page had left our station and moved back to San Diego. His departure was sudden and suspicious, but very hush-hush around the newsroom, so none of us knew for sure if he had quit or been fired. In his place, the station manager had hired an inexperienced, first-time news director named Dave Beech. He was awkward in both manner and appearance.

“Heyyyyyyy Auburn, how’s it goin’?” said Dave, sounding artificially chipper.

“Dave, hi, how are you?”
“Great, just really busy,” he said, taking his feet off his desk and setting down his sandwich. “What’s up?”

“Well, I just wanted to let you know that I am giving you a couple months notice before my last day of work here. I’m leaving the television business so I can go to graduate school full time. I’m working toward a master’s degree in writing.”

Dave smiled wider than necessary, given my resignation. “I knew you were going to say that,” he said. “When will be your last day?”

“Well, I guess that depends on the trial. I’d like to stay through the end of it, and I’d be happy to work on a freelance basis down the road if you need someone to fill in here and there. I start summer school in June, so hopefully the trial is done before then.”

“Okee dokee,” said Dave, grabbing an unlabeled VHS tape off the floor in front of him. “Shouldn’t have any trouble finding your replacement. Check these out.” Using the toe of his shoe, Dave pulled his bottom desk drawer out to reveal several dozen additional VHS tapes crammed inside carelessly like a pile of bones. “I have hundreds more where those came from. Some of them are pretty good,” he said, grinning.

“Great. Well, good luck with that,” I said before sprinting out of his office. I headed home that day thinking that his reaction alone was enough to help me feel confident that I was indeed making the right decision. I hadn’t even stepped out the door yet, and already they were looking for someone to fill my shoes. I was obviously a dispensable employee. Dave had made that clear. I knew right then that while I finished up my last couple of months as a reporter, I was not going to do stories in order to bring up our ratings or impress Dave and the other station managers. I wasn’t going to worry anymore whether my packages would catch the attention of national outlets, nor if they
were Emmy award-worthy. Instead, I was going to do stories that were tailor-made for Sheila, but not the idiotic version of Sheila the consultants had introduced me to. Instead, I’d do stories for my own version of Sheila: a capable, intelligent and caring woman who also happened to stay home and take care of her house and her family.

Those next few days after my announcement were hard. I began to feel wishy-washy and wonder if I was making a big mistake. I knew that a part of me would miss being a newscaster, and that I would probably always wonder “what if” when I thought back on my career. But I also knew I would be mostly relieved to say goodbye to this portion of my life. Dave would find a new reporter quickly, someone else who had dreamed of being a journalist all of their life, just like I had. He would probably pay them even less than I was making, and they would probably be forced to work twice as hard. But who knows? Maybe it would work out for them. Maybe they would have the drive in them that I just didn’t quite have.

As for me, I felt ready to chase a new dream, one that had been sitting dormant inside me for more than two decades. I was ready to try my hand at attempting to write and publish children’s books. I wanted to be the type of writer who relies on a simple pencil and paper instead of a gigantic microwave truck and a fancy news logo. I knew that staying home and taking care of a baby wouldn’t leave a whole lot of free time for writing, but I would continue to pluck away at this goal, and eventually I would get there. Just like TV reporting once seemed like a far-fetched dream, publishing a book felt like a long shot, but I could only succeed if I continued to try.

Once I made the decision to quit, I began to prepare myself emotionally for my exit. I knew it would be hard to say goodbye to my TV friends and the adrenaline rush in
the newsroom every afternoon before deadline: scanner traffic buzzing, printers squealing and reporters reading their scripts out loud. But I also knew that my real friends would be waiting for me on the outside. And I knew that Schuyler and Moo would be happy to spend more time with a less stressed out version of me, one who had time to take leisurely walks after our sensible 6:00 p.m. dinner. If being a reporter meant sacrificing the Sheila in me, then surely it wasn’t my destiny. I had spent so many years writing for Sheila, talking about Sheila and thinking about Sheila, that it didn’t occur to me how much like her I had actually become. Much like Sheila, I no longer cared about fame or fortune or notoriety. It was the simple things in life that kept me going. I would have much rather mastered beef bourguignon than won an Emmy. I would have preferred to take off all my make-up, grow my hair long and be one-of-a-kind, rather than continue to try to squeeze myself into a TV reporter cookie cutter. And as a homemaker, a wife, a friend and a writer, I would no longer have to wash off my face to find myself.
Writing for Sheila – Chapter 10

In the months leading up to the James Biela trial, the type of stories I covered changed drastically. With an end to my career in sight, I no longer felt like I needed to impress Dave or the other managers by always jumping on the lead story of the day. I let the newer, more ambitious reporters take the house fires, the car crashes and the drug busts; instead I focused on doing the type of stories that I would have liked to watch on the news if I were a viewer. I thought about Sheila often during this time, and I did my best to avoid the “typical” Sheila stories that were normally expected of me. I also made it a point to only do stories that could help people, not hurt them.

One particularly slow and windy news day, Scott, my assignment editor, sent me outdoors to get video of blowing leaves and upturned garbage cans for the 5:00 news slot. He said I’d be live on Windy Hill, and that I should try to gather some reaction about the weather from members of the community. I had done this story so many times that I could almost hear the script playing out in my mind before I left the building. Unfortunately, I didn’t have any better story ideas to pitch that day, so I headed out to do what he asked. My photographer, John LeBosquet, drove downtown Reno to the Truckee River whitewater park where we hoped to find a few people to interview. I caught up to a middle-aged woman crossing the street in a casual business suit.

“How am I ma’am,” I said, pushing my blowing hair behind my ears and moving the microphone toward her face. “What do you think about this wind?” I asked her, feeling ridiculous as I said it.

“What do I think about it?” she asked, her eyebrows furrowing in confusion.

“Oh—yes—I mean, how are you coping with it?”
“Well,” she said, “It’s wind. We live in Reno. It’s often windy. I don’t see how that’s news.” She glanced up at the green man in the traffic light and began to move her feet. “Sorry, I don’t have time for this,” she finished, and walked out into the intersection.

Me neither, I thought to myself. And then I remembered a story idea I had thought of weeks before, but hadn’t yet pitched at a morning meeting. “Come on John, we’re going to do a different story. Head to the new Ace Hardware store in Midtown on South Virginia Street,” I told him. As we drove, I called the station and made a case for the story I wanted to do about a new local business owned by three local brothers. I had discovered the store one weekend when Schuyler and I were looking for painting supplies to add some color to our guest room. The new Ace was located inside of a century-old brick building with vast hardwood floors, a massive basement, and an old airplane suspended from the tall ceiling. It was nothing like the Home Depot or the Lowe’s where most of the community had gotten used to shopping.

“This place has so much character!” I remember exclaiming to Schuyler as we gazed at the old Radio Flyer tricycles and wagons the store had high up on shelves around the perimeter of the main floor. The owner, Tim Carter, and his two brothers, had decided to open the store when they realized that a good old-fashioned hardware store was missing in Reno. He suggested I come do a story sometime about the importance of a mom and pop hardware store to make a community feel complete.

“The thing is, our prices just aren’t going to be as low as the big chain hardware stores are. We don’t have the buying power to compete with them,” he told me during the interview. “But what we do have is a family here. Our employees are all homeowners, fixer-uppers and do-it-yourselfers. You’ve got a question, we’ve got an answer.”
Tim walked John and me around the Ace store and showed us the type of personal, small-time shopping experience a person could expect to encounter if they walked into it. He showed us the complimentary popcorn machine in the corner, the rows and rows of tiny nuts, bolts and screws organized into giant metal barrels, and the outdoor section, which included steel-handled barbecue tools and kitschy, plastic watering cans. He told us that if there was an item someone needed that his store didn’t currently carry, that he’d be happy to special order it.

“We just want people to support local businesses so our tax dollars stay right here at home. If they want to go to Home Depot and send their money off to some big corporation, then fine. But we guarantee their experience here at Ace Carter Brothers will be much more fulfilling.”

By the time the news aired that evening, the wind had died down almost completely. I would have been embarrassed standing up on Windy Hill with the sun shining all around me. Instead, I went live on the sidewalk in front of Ace Hardware, and I ran a two-minute package about the newest addition to Reno’s Midtown district. The response to the story was unprecedented. It was the most-read story on our station website for several days straight, and dozens of community members called in to get the address and location of the new store. Tim Carter called me personally to tell me that the number of customers walking into the store had increased significantly since the story aired.

“Most of the people who have been coming in say they heard about us on KOLO,” he raved. “Thank you so much for covering us, Auburn. We really appreciate it.”
I felt great about the story, but not just because I had helped support a local business. I was also convinced that if Sheila were watching, she would be excited about the opportunity to shop in a local, family-owned and operated hardware store. I was helping the Carter brothers bring in business, and I was helping Sheila open her eyes to something new. I was even helping to break the stereotype of a “typical” topic for a story geared toward women. Instead of focusing on baby product recalls and parenting trends like the topics I was often assigned, I turned my energy toward power tools and the local shopping movement. The story on Ace Hardware ended up starting a trend in Reno’s local television news industry that none of us had anticipated.

For months after the story aired, we received dozens of calls each day from local business owners and community members who wanted us to do stories about other new businesses opening and expanding in our area. It catapulted into what became a months-long string of stories about brand new restaurants, clothing boutiques, bookstores, and more. Week after week, I covered new business openings, such as Reno’s first cupcake shop, a natural hot dog restaurant downtown, and even a locally-owned fly fishing company. Local business became my beat, and I felt defeated when another station or the newspaper scooped me on a new business. My coworkers at KOLO came to me nearly every day with ideas about new local businesses that I could cover. I was even accused of some local business owners of offering free advertising to their new competitors.

Despite the criticism, I felt wonderful about the contribution I was making to the community. While I was helping out local business owners by getting the word out about their new shops, I figured I was also helping increase the amount of sales tax money being earned in Washoe County. And on top of that, I was helping Sheila get informed
about the stay local, shop local movement that seemed to be creeping across the globe. With a downturn in the economy, shopping local was more important than ever, and I felt like I had a lot to do with the success of increasing that trend in Reno. And a small part of me had to smile mischievously when I thought about the advertising dollars KOLO was probably losing since I was promoting businesses for free when they may have otherwise purchased commercials and airtime.

Even as I continued to cover local business, I also turned my efforts elsewhere. As a longtime fan of vintage and recycled clothing, I had become an avid thrift store shopper in the Reno-Sparks area. I knew which stores had the best children’s books (which I collected long before I had a child), which stores had the cheapest prices on handbags, and which days each of the stores got in their newest inventory. Given my small television reporter salary, I saved money by purchasing most of my clothing at second hand shops. Over the years, I figured I had probably saved thousands of dollars by doing this. Around the time I was on my local television news rant, I noticed that I wasn’t always alone when browsing the aisles of Savers, Goodwill and The Salvation Army. More and more often, I’d come across other women out buying worn, leather cowboy boots, floral maxi dresses from the 1970’s, and even cutesy vintage baby clothes for the children they sometimes carried in their shopping carts. These women, like me, were looking for a bargain. I also noticed more and more second hand stores opening up their doors in the Reno community, which told me the demand for used clothing was growing. Plato’s Closet, a trendy thrift boutique for young women, opened up in the Midtown District that month, followed by Junkees Clothing Exchange just a few blocks away. Both of these stores also paid cash to people who had used clothes they wanted to sell. It
was a concept Reno hadn’t yet seen before. People could make money off their old
clothes, and then replace them with “new” clothing for a small price. I did a story on this
new string of business, and helped spread the word about ways for Sheila and her family
could save money and still look fashionable.

“I take my daughters here because I know that their style is important to them, but
I can’t afford to go to Macy’s or Dillard’s. They love this place!” a Sheila-type told me as
she browsed the jean aisle at Plato’s Closet one afternoon.

Again, hundreds of emails and phone calls streamed into our station after the story
aired. Women all over the community wanted to know how they too could jump on the
thrift store bandwagon and start saving some money. The owner of Plato’s Closet said
my story helped her launch the craze over her business that she was previously lacking.
In fact, the store became so successful that after only a few months in business, she
expanded the floor space and opened a second thrift store next door called Clothes
Mentor, a similar concept but suited for a slightly older crowd. It felt amazing to be
helping people save money in a tough economy and giving entrepreneurs the confidence
they needed to take a risk and open up a local business.

Similar results happened when I did stories about the crafting, do-it-yourself, and
homemade gift giving trends. I demonstrated through stories how people could save
money on Christmas and birthday gifts by making presents with inexpensive items or
even things most people already have on hand at home. While some of my coworkers
snickered at the idea of a story on this concept, they stopped laughing when the story
remained the mostly read article on our website for nearly a week straight. I was reaching
people, and I was doing it without exploiting, sensationalizing or fabricating. I had never felt better about my job.

My shining moment came just a few weeks before the James Biela trial began. I was assigned to cover a local job fair taking place at the Grand Sierra Resort one afternoon, and I was prepared for the worst. Job fairs were common, but there were far more unemployed people in our community than job openings, so the majority of the attendees walked away without work.

When my photographer and I arrived at the resort that day, we saw a line of people pouring out the glass revolving doors of the casino, and wrapping around the entrance into the parking lot. It was the same scene we had come across at every job fair that year. As we were gathering our gear out of the back of the news jeep, a middle-aged woman pushing a toddler in stroller walked up to us from behind.

“Excuse me, do you know if your TV station is still hiring for the receptionist position? I applied a while ago, and I’ve followed up twice, but I haven’t heard back yet. Can you tell me if the position is still open?”

My heart began to race, and I scrambled to come up with an answer. I knew that position had been filled weeks ago, but I didn’t want to let this lady down. And furthermore, the station manager had decided to hire a woman named Michelle Beech as the new receptionist, none other than Dave Beech’s wife. Everyone in the newsroom was disgusted and appalled by the decision, but we knew that our opinions didn’t matter.

“Actually ma’am, I am sorry to say, they did already hire someone for the position. It’s been filled for a few weeks now.”
“Oh,” she said, sounding disappointed. “Well that’s okay, I just wish they would have called to let me know. Thanks anyway.” She walked away from us with her head down as she headed toward the crowd of people lining up for the job fair.

I felt sick for this woman, and for all the other people who had also applied for the KOLO receptionist job. Here we were, in the middle of a severe economic recession, and our station managers were hiring their own employees’ wives to fill good jobs. It was so unfair. This woman who had children to support needed a job so much more than Michelle Beech did. I remember wishing there was something I could do to fix this incredibly unjust move made by the KOLO managers.

As we walked inside the doors to the Grand Sierra, we were shocked to see that the line for the job fair continued to snake through the hallways, wind up a set of stairs, and end outside the double doors to a large conference room, labeled simply: Job Fair Here. There had to be 5,000 or more people in line to get into the fair, many of them accompanied by their children. If they didn’t have jobs, they probably couldn’t afford childcare either. It was depressing to think about. We walked past the people in line, stopping every so often to interview a job seeker and find out what kind of work they were looking for. Most of them said they’d take any job that paid. As I finished up my initial interviews and headed toward the entrance to the fair, an anonymous person called out to me.

“What do you care about this fair anyway, Miss TV Reporter. You have a job.”

The words stung. I looked up to see who was speaking, but whoever it was stayed quiet. I had nothing to say to this person, but I wished I could tell them that that they had
accused me of wasn’t true. I wasn’t there to mock or pity them. I *did* care. So I decided that if I couldn’t tell this person I cared, I would show them instead.

The job fair did little to boost the confidence of people who were there hoping to find work. Aside from the typical presence of Army and Navy recruiters, there were the usual Avon and Mary Kay booths in one corner of the room. Anyone with experience would know that those “jobs” take an initial investment cost that many people can’t afford. Also, they’re sales jobs, so the salary depends on direct sales. The people in line for the job fair needed something more reliable, including a regular paycheck, insurance and benefits. There were also booths representing the Nevada Department of Wildlife, NV Energy, and several financial planning companies. After walking around the room and talking to agents at each of the booths, I discovered that many of them were there to gain exposure for their agency, but not to actually hire new workers. In fact, after making my rounds of the entire room, I found that out of the dozen or so booths at the job fair, there were really only two or three positions open. It didn’t take long for the job fair attendees to figure this out either.

“This is such a waste of my time,” one man in a business suit told me. “I have my Master’s degree in engineering, but I was laid off last month. I came here because I am in desperate need of a real job, and selling makeup just isn’t going to cut it.”

Another woman wearing an out-of-date pantsuit said she’d called in sick to the temp agency she was working for so she could attend the fair. “I don’t even know why I came here. None of these places are actually hiring. I waited in line for two hours for nothing.”
I had no trouble collecting sound bites from a handful of desperate job fair attendees in order to fill my minute-and-a-half long story assignment. But just as I was about to head back to the station, I decided to collect just one more. A tan, dark-haired man who looked to be in his early 40’s was standing awkwardly in the center of the room, fidgeting and looking like he couldn’t decide which booth to visit first. I approached him.

“Hi there, how are you today sir? I’m doing a story about this job fair for KOLO 8 News. Would you mind chatting with me for a few minutes?”

“No, not at all,” he replied in a thick New York accent.

“Can I get your name please?”

“Sure, it’s Joe.”

“Okay Joe, what kind of work are you looking for?”

“I’m a builder by trade, but when the housing market went under, I lost my contract. That was a year ago and I have been out of work since. I’m desperate at this point. I build good homes. I do quality work. Call me, someone, anyone,” he said, turning away from me and looking straight into the camera. “Please? My number is 775-858-9749. I’ll do anything!” He smiled charmingly and looked up at me through long, dark eyelashes. I couldn’t help but wonder, who wouldn’t want to hire this guy? I hoped that after my story aired, maybe someone would.

As I walked away from the job fair, I felt sorry for the people still waiting in line to get in. They were standing primly in fresh-pressed business attire, some carrying their crisp white resumes, others holding briefcases. They were eager and willing workers who didn’t have a shot in hell of scoring a job inside those two double doors. I observed as
men and women who had already been inside the job fair came out and told people in line not to waste their time any longer. It was a heartbreaking scene that drew attention to just how bad our economy really was.

Back at the station, I put together a story that told the truth about the job fair. I was sure that the Grand Sierra Resort would probably be angry and want to pull advertising dollars from our station, but I didn’t care. I wanted people to know what these fairs were like so they wouldn’t waste time on them in the future. I thought about Sheila and her family trying to make it, and what a day wasted standing in line might mean for them. When I began editing down the sound bite from my interview with Joe from New York, I decided to use the entire thing. It was a plea from the heart for a job, and I wanted the public to see that.

The day after the story aired, I was sitting at my desk sorting through emails from viewers who told me that they too were angered by the job fair. They said they’d been to similar fairs all over town, but were still broke and unemployed. I was about to reply to one of them when the phone at my desk rang.

“Newsroom, this is Auburn,” I said quickly.

“Hi Auburn, my name is Kathy Brown. I live in the Red Rock area, and my husband and I are building our dream home right now. I was wondering if you could give me the phone number of that man from your story last night? Um, Joe, I think his name was?”

With shaking hands, I dropped the phone receiver and fumbled to pick it back up again. “Are you still there, Kathy? Sorry, I dropped the phone. Yes, of course you can have Joe’s number. Just one moment please.”
I couldn’t believe it. In all of my time spent in journalism, never had I seen a story have such a direct and immediate impact. If all journalism were this effective, media critics wouldn’t have nearly as much to complain about. Sure, some might argue that this story was really just free advertising for one person, and not real, legitimate news. But I believed that if I could help even just one person get a job by using my power as a television journalist, then I was doing more good than most TV reporters did their entire careers. I gave Kathy Joe’s phone number, and she promised to let me know if she hired him. A few day’s later, Joe came by our station to do a second interview and thank us for helping him find employment. He had been working all week with Kathy and her husband to help lay the foundation on their new home. Joe said that without my story, he would have eventually become homeless.

The job fair story was one of the most memorable packages I ever put together as a television reporter. It reminded me of why journalism exists in the first place, and it restored my faith in humankind. When there’s injustice in the world—such as job fairs with no jobs—it’s up to journalists to help spread the word. The fact that Joe got a job out of the deal was just a bonus. Kind people like Kathy don’t come around everyday, and her extreme generosity amazed me.

With just a few weeks left until the James Biela murder trial, I had to force myself to switch gears. After several months of doing “good” stories about local businesses and brave entrepreneurs, followed by the incredible job fair story, it was difficult to get into the mind frame required for reporting on a gruesome murder. But when I thought about Sheila, who had been waiting more than a year to see the Brianna Denison murder case through to closure, I knew I owed it to her and the rest of the community to do my very
best work on covering the trial. With Sheila in the front of my mind, I set out to finish what I had started.
“Is there anyone in this courtroom who has never heard anything about the murder case involving Brianna Denison?” asked the judge as he folded his hands on his desk and scanned the room through silver-rimmed glasses. Out of the initial jury pool of 75, not a single juror raised their hand. “Okay then, another question: Is there anyone who believes they cannot set aside their prior beliefs about the case and the defendant when deciding a proper verdict on this case?” Dozens of hands shot into the air.

“Yes Ma’am,” said the judge, pointing to a young woman near the front.

“Your honor, given that I’m a female and a college student at UNR, I feel I am biased regarding this case. I remember being terrified when this all happened.”

“Okay, you’re excused,” said the judge, moving quickly to the next hand in the air. He pointed to a middle-aged man with a handle bar mustache and overalls on.

“Sir, I have a moral issue with the death penalty so I don’t believe I would be a good juror for this case.”

“Excused. You ma’am, in the back?” Judge Perry pointed to a Hispanic woman in her 40’s.

“Your honor, I’ve seen too much on television. I already think he’s guilty.”
“Thank you ma’am, please see yourself out.”

One by one, the judge excused local citizens who said they believed they wouldn’t make fair and impartial jurors. Some of them said they knew Brianna Denison or James Biela, while others said they were familiar with one or more of the 120 names on the chalkboard. But most of the people who Judge Perry sent home were Sheila types who told him they had absolutely no tolerance for gruesome crimes like the ones James Biela was accused of. While there was no doubt that the Brianna Denison murder was a highly-publicized and extremely sensationalized case, I also had to question whether or not some of the potential jurors were saying anything they could in order to get excused from sitting through the trial. After a few people were excused after saying they were against the death penalty, many more jurors began using that excuse as well. Luckily, Judge Perry caught on to this method quickly and became stricter about letting people go home.

For the first time since his arrest, James Biela was not wearing an orange jumpsuit and silver shackles. He had lost a lot of weight in jail, and he looked younger than he had when he made his initial appearance in front of the judge. The spare tire around his waist was gone, and his blue eyes looked brighter and clearer. His attorneys chose a crisp navy blue suit that day, and they had arranged for a fresh haircut. James could have been just about any typical 20-something Reno citizen. I stared at the side of his head before looking down at my laptop and typing another update.

KOLO: Brianna Denison’s family is in the courtroom today, as well as many of her close friends. James Biela’s mother
is here as well, accompanied by what appears to be his brother.

Dave Beech and the other station managers had decided to try a new experimental method for covering the trial. Because of the high interest in the case, and since only one television camera was allowed in the courtroom at a time, I had been instructed to type a live blog as the trial unfolded. I’d been given a laptop, which sat squarely on my knees for the duration of the trial. Our station’s web designer had created a blog on a website called CoverItLive.com, which allowed me to keep a constant flow of information from the courtroom to the public. Instead of spending all of my energy finding an “angle” each day that would appeal to Sheila and beat out our competitors, I simply focused on relaying real-time trial information as it happened. At first, the idea seemed a bit prehistoric, given that our station had the capability to shoot high definition video and edit together fancy sound bites and flashy graphics. But it took only a day or so for word about our blog to get out, and the community’s reaction was extremely positive.

Comment from David:
Great job guys! I like this live coverage!

Comment from Hillary:
You’re doing an awesome job, Auburn! This is much faster than other news sources.

Comment from Becky:
This is great! I feel like I am there with you.

By the end of the first day, my fingers and wrists were sore from constant typing, and my eyes burned from staring at the computer screen, but I felt fully immersed in the
trial and dedicated to the bloggers who had been following me since jury selection began. I could feel that old familiar adrenaline rush I would get only when covering the most important and exciting news stories. I was determined to deliver the best coverage possible to Sheila and all the other people in our community who had been glued to the Brianna Denison case for the past two years. Many of my bloggers homemakers who wrote in to tell me how much they appreciated being able to stay in the loop even though they couldn’t go to the courthouse and watch it in person. Other women sent in messages from their workplaces, saying there would be low productivity in their office until the trial was finished. I knew all of these people—Sheilas or not—were counting on me.

“Okay everyone, this jury pool seems to be beating the odds at this point. Selection is moving along much more quickly than we anticipated, and I am predicting that we will have a jury sat by tomorrow evening at the latest,” said Judge Perry at the close of the first day in court.

It went more quickly than anyone had anticipated. By 4:30 the next afternoon, 12 jurors and two alternates had been selected to sit through the James Biela murder trial. Eight women and six men had been determined to be an impartial panel in the case, despite the fact that the Brianna Denison murder case had saturated news content for two full years. The community was shocked, but Judge Perry didn’t waste a single moment.

“Court is adjourned. We’ll see you all back here in the morning,” he said, removing his glasses for a moment and rubbing the bridge of his nose.

“All rise,” said the court bailiff, as Judge Perry exited through the door behind his desk.
Opening statements began at 9:00 a.m. sharp on the morning of May 12th, 2010. The courtroom was buzzing with energy as Washoe County Deputy District Attorney Christopher Hicks stood up and addressed the jury for the first time. “Ladies and Gentleman of the jury,” he began.

KOLO: The prosecution is giving the jury a timeline of the crimes in this case as they took place. He first mentioned the young woman who was held at gunpoint and raped in the parking garage, then the Taiwanese exchange student who was kidnapped and sexually assaulted in the cab of a truck, and finally, Brianna Denison, who was raped, strangled and then ditched in a field.

Hicks pointed a long, deliberate finger straight at James Biela as each read off each of the counts James was being charged with. He told the jury he intended to prove that James Biela was indeed responsible for each of these heinous crimes. The members of the jury followed the finger, looking in Biela’s direction, but he didn’t flinch. Instead, he kept his hands folded on the table, looking straight in front of him.

Comment from lovelaw:
This dude’s a gonner!

As the trial unfolded in front of me, I continued to type furiously. At first, it was difficult to keep up. I had to listen to what the attorneys were saying, type what I was hearing onto the blog site, and field comments and questions from readers all at the same time. But once I got the hang of the system, I was able to type updates while still thinking
about the story and live shot I would also have to deliver in front of the courthouse at the end of the day.

When the prosecuting attorneys spoke to the jury, it seemed like they too were targeting the same Sheila demographic that our corporate consultants advised us to focus on. It was as though they were directly addressing a woman who they knew would be shocked and angered over the gruesome details in the case. While the media had latched onto the Brianna Denison story from the very beginning, it seemed like the attorneys involved in the case had also spent more time and energy on this trial compared to others. For journalists, it was all about increasing our ratings in order to make more money. Perhaps for the attorneys, it was about adding another tally to their cases won list, or the opportunity to advance their career by being involved in a high-profile capital punishment case. Whatever the reason, the story was filled with suspense, and the murder details brought up in court carried out like a made-for-TV movie brought to real life.

KOLO: The autopsy showed that Brianna’s cause of death was asphyxiation by ligature, meaning she was strangled.
Evidence has proven that KT Hunter’s thong underwear was used to strangle Brianna Denison.

Comment from Kellen:
So sad.

KOLO: The prosecution intends to prove that James Biela is guilty. The prosecution rests. Defense is up now.

Public Defender Jay Slocum took the stand, looking somberly at the jury. “This moment has been a long time coming,” he began. “I am speaking to you on behalf of my
client, Jimmy Biela. What happened in this case is a tragedy. Awful things happened. I am not going to dispute that.”

KOLO: The defense is telling the jury that the first rape victim never got a good look at her assailant, and that she only went to police after the news broke about Brianna Denison’s disappearance.

I looked around the courtroom, taking a mental note of my surroundings. A giant wood-framed painting of Abraham Lincoln hung on the wall behind Judge Perry, as if he were commanding honesty from those who took the stand. The court reporter typed furiously, only looking up periodically to turn her left ear toward the voice of the defense attorney. She mouthed the words as she typed them. To my left, on the opposite side of the courtroom, sat Brianna Denison’s mother, Bridgette; her aunt, Lauren; and her younger brother, Brighton. All three of them were stone-faced, pursing their lips only slightly during the most gruesome parts of the testimony. James Biela’s mother and brother sat directly in front of me, huddled together closely as though they were watching some kind of horror film. Both sets of families were accompanied by victim’s advocate appointees from the county, their yellow hanging badges giving them away.

KOLO:

The defense attorney says he will be asking the jury for an acquittal since evidence will leave reasonable doubt that James Biela is the perpetrator of the crimes he is charged with. The defense rests.

Comment from suspected sociopath’s ex:
You’re doing great! THANKS!

Comment from tbo:
Can you sneak a camera into the courtroom so we can watch with you? Just kidding. LOL.

Comment from jj:
Thanks Auburn, this is a great service.

KOLO:
You’re welcome everyone. I know many of you would like to be here to watch this trial in person. I will do my best to give you all of the information I can, as quickly as I can. Thanks for reading!

I thought I was going to hate blogging, but after only an hour or so of testimony, I realized that aside from the fact that I felt I was doing a valuable service for the residents of Reno, I was also really enjoying it. It gave me an opportunity to keep extensive notes on the trial—which I could use later on for more in-depth story packages—and it helped me to gauge the reaction of the community based on the comments that continued rolling in. Most of the people who commented during the trial were women, or at least they were using female names as their screen identities on Coveritlive.com. While the corporate consultants told us Sheila wasn’t computer savvy, I believed they were wrong. Women who fit the Sheila profile seemed to be on board with the experimental blog coverage, and she was benefitting more from my minute-by-minute blog than she was from the slanted news stories my competitors were putting together. Back at the TV station, KOLO managers were ecstatic.
“Great blogging, Auburn. You’re doing a fantastic job. It’s too bad you’re leaving soon because this is how we’re going to cover all trials from now on,” Dave said into my ear when I called to check in.

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. It was the first time in nearly a year of working for him that I had ever received a single compliment from Dave. He was full of snarky sarcasm, criticism and useless suggestions, but he hardly ever uttered a word of praise to anyone. For a split second, his words made me feel remorseful about my decision to leave the news business. Sometimes hearing that you’re doing a good job can make all the difference. In my case, it helped alleviate some of the negative feelings I harbored about my job. For just a moment, I was okay with the fact that I worked extremely hard for very little compensation. It felt great to be appreciated.

“Thanks Dave,” I said confidently. “I’ll see you back at the station after the 6:30 show.”

The Taiwanese exchange student was the first witness to take the stand. She described the night in December of 2009 when she was attacked and kidnapped outside of her apartment building across from the UNR campus. She testified that her rapist had covered up her eyes and drove her to a nearby parking lot where he forced her to perform oral sex on him.

“I was afraid he would hurt me. When I wake up, I feel really cold and hurt. I think maybe I died,” she said in a difficult-to-understand Taiwanese accent.

Comment from guest:

Was James Biela actually charged with this assault?”

KOLO:
Yes he was, based on DNA evidence on the woman’s body that matched Biela’s DNA sample.

Comment from guest:

Thank you, Auburn. I wish I could be there in the courtroom, but I am a stay-at-home Mom and I have to be home with my kids. You’re doing a great thing. 😊

And there it was, confirmation that Sheila was really out there, and that she was paying close attention to this trial. It felt amazing to be able to bring the trial into the homes of so many people—especially Sheila’s—but without purposely choosing an angle in order to gain viewers. The trial itself was important and interesting enough to bring in viewers and readers on its own. We didn’t have to bend the truth and sensationalize the story in order to get people to pay attention. In the world of television news, this was a major breakthrough. I thought more about Sheila and how she had been following this case for two long years. I reflected back on the women who I interviewed at Brianna’s candlelight vigil; sobbing, hysterical women who said they wanted more than anything to bring Brianna back so that her mother Bridget wouldn’t have to suffer anymore. These were complete strangers to the Denison family, and yet they were there to offer their presence and support. I had never in my life been as dedicated and committed to an outside cause as these “Sheilas” were, and for that, I had to give them my utmost respect. These women were not the foolish, ignorant couch potatoes we were pandering to. On the contrary, they were kind, selfless community supporters who were wise beyond our wildest imaginations.
As the trial continued, the comments continued rolling in, many of them proving that Sheila knew a lot more about the world around her than we’d been giving her credit for. While not all of the women reading my blog fit the Sheila description, the majority of my most dedicated followers did. These women lived and breathed the Brianna Denison case from day one, and many of them were as familiar with its details as I was after covering it for two years. Often times, when a question came in from a viewer that I couldn’t answer, one of my dedicated Sheilas would jump in with a response.

**Comment from Christopher:**
Wow, only a fifteen-minute opening argument from the defense, and just a ten-minute cross-examination on one of the most important witnesses in the case. What gives?

**Comment from Shelly:**
It’s a defense strategy to put all the weight on the prosecution to prove their case beyond a reasonable doubt. The less they say, the better. Remember, he is innocent until proven guilty.

The number of viewers logged on to Coveritlive.com during the trial increased exponentially by the hour. At the end of jury selection, there were 500 people logged onto the sight, and by the finish of the first day of testimony, the number of readers had jumped to 700. On day three of the trial, 1,400 readers were logged on, and the numbers kept rising.

**Comment from inVermont:**
Nice blogging! Any way to watch this live from Vermont?
Comment from OhioGirl:
This is amazing! Life before the Internet...what did we do?

Comment from LKR:
I can’t tell you how much I appreciate this. I can’t watch live video feeds at work, but I can read your blog! Thanks Auburn! You rock.

While it felt wonderful to be creating such a positive buzz in the community, underneath it all, something else still nagged at me. I knew that at the end of my day of blogging, I would still have to go outside and stand in front of the bright camera lights while I stumbled my way through a live shot. I knew that I would get home late, miss dinner, spend a few exhausted moments with Schuyler, and then get into bed before I had to get up in the morning and do it all over again. When I watched my DVR recording of the previous night’s live shot, I’d feel humiliated and frustrated at how the bad angle of the camera on me made me look fat, and at how my hair looked frizzy and windblown. The pride I felt while blogging would be overshadowed by the fact that television news was a shallow business, and that not even a popular trial blog was going to change that. Once this trial ended, everything would go back to the way they were before it started, and I would be miserable once again.

My self-reflections in court also made me realize that despite my petty complaints about frizzy hair and late dinners, no one was suffering worse than the victim’s families. It was selfish of me to think otherwise. When I looked over at Brianna Denison’s family sitting in the courtroom, it occurred to me that they would have been sitting in those same seats, with or without the news media presence. They were the ones who were suffering,
not me. I looked at Brianna’s aunt, Lauren, who was gently squeezing Bridget Denison’s hand while she wiped her nose gently with a tissue. As polite as she had always been to me and the other local news reporters, the truth was, she probably didn’t care whether we showed up in court or not. She probably just wished she had Brianna back.

As I continued to blog, I kept the Denison family in the front of my mind. Despite my former actions as an ambitious reporter, I wasn’t going to do anything to intentionally exploit them, nor was I going to use them as a tool for gaining viewers. I had exploited them enough already. Instead, I was going to report the facts of the case and the trial as I heard them, and I really hoped I would make Sheila proud.

By the time the closing arguments in the trial began two weeks later, I had become more connected to the murder case than I ever thought imaginable. I figured that despite the fact that I would probably need carpal tunnel surgery after all the typing I had done, I had also gained a group thousands of die-hard blog followers who had been glued to my Coveritlive.com blog since day one. The numbers of readers varied day by day, but often times there were three or four thousand bloggers logged on at any given time. The station managers were pleased with a spike in ratings during the trial, but I was more focused on my human viewers than numbers and dollar signs. I knew many of my readers by screen name, and had developed relationships that extended far beyond the normal association between a journalist and a viewer. I considered many of them friends, especially the Sheilas who seemed to be the most dedicated to my blog.

When prosecutor Elliott Sattler addressed the jury, a hush fell over the courtroom. My own fingers clicking away on my laptop was the only noise aside from Elliott’s voice. But I continued typing anyway. For the first time since the trial began, Elliott gave
a full-blown account of what he believed happened to Brianna Denison on the night of her murder. While the details of the case had been described over and over again, no one had ever spoken it out loud and in chronological order before. Hearing it that way was heartbreaking.

Elliott told the jury that sometime around 4:40 in the morning on January 20th, 2010, James Biela looked into the unlocked front door of the house on Mackay Way, and saw the beautiful Brianna Denison sleeping on the couch.

“Her head is facing the door, so she can’t see him, and James Biela can’t pass up this opportunity,” continued Sattler. “It only takes five or six steps for a man of his size to go from the front door to where she is sleeping. He takes the pillow and shoves it over her face with his Jujitsu knowledge and plumber arms. He pushes and pushes so hard that there are teeth marks. He pushes so hard that it wipes tears and mascara from her face. Eventually, she is unconscious.

The defendant is a big, strong guy, and Bri is a little tiny person. He then sees a pair of Miss Hunter’s thong underwear on the floor, which he takes. He scoops Brianna up and carries her out the back door, and he takes her into his truck and sexually assaults her. He leaves his sperm on her body. But after the rape, he has a problem. He knows there is no doubt Brianna would be able to identify him, so he takes his interest in women’s underwear to the next level. He wraps the underwear he stole around Brianna’s neck and he strangles her to death. The doctor testified that it would be seconds until she was unconscious, but it takes four minutes for her to die.”

KOLO:

He is saying she suffered.
Hundreds of comments began popping up on my laptop screen, many of them calling James Biela a terrorist, a coward and a monster, but I ignored them and continued to type as Sattler spoke to the jury.

KOLO:

Sattler is telling the jury that there is 37,000 pieces of paper tied to this case, including DNA reports from the crime lab, secret witness tips, etc. He says there were 5,000 Secret Witness tips and 700 DNA samples collected.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, from the beginning of this case, it’s amazing the amount of numbers involved. There are five counts against Biela and three victims. Three innocent women. But in the end, there is only one: one inescapable conclusion. James Michael Biela is a kidnapper, a rapist and a murderer.” Sattler quickly looked down and walked humbly back to his seat in the courtroom. “The defense rests, your honor.”

After the lunch break, Washoe County Public Defender Jay Slocum delivered his closing statements to the jury. He brought up several inconsistencies in the testimony given by the prosecution’s witnesses, including the first rape victim’s inability to perfectly describe her attacker and his vehicle. He also attempted to blame the Washoe County Crime Lab for failing to use proper protocol when sampling, comparing and destroying DNA evidence. But mostly, Slocum attempted to convince the jury that a reasonable doubt existed in the case, and that there was a chance—however so slight it might be—that James Biela was innocent.
“And at your hands, I ask for an acquittal on all charges. Thank you.” Slocum walked somberly back to his seat where he patted James Biela on the back. “The defense rests.”

KOLO:
Okay everyone, the judge has called a recess while the jury deliberates. He told them they get to look at all the evidence in the case while they decide the fate of James Biela.

Comment from Dave Ash:
Your fingers must be ready to fall off.

Comment from Gabrielle:
Thank you Auburn! You made this as close as one could get had one been able to attend the trial in person. You’re fabulous!

Comment from Daryl:
Fingers crossed.

KOLO:
Signing off for now everyone. I’ll be back when the jury reaches a verdict. Stay tuned!

By the time court was adjourned that day, my live blog was overrun with comments and questions from community members who had been following the trial. Many of them told me they didn’t think they’d be able to sleep that night, or at all until a verdict was reached. The Sheilas were the most dedicated bloggers, some of them asking
me if I planned to write about book about the Brianna Denison murder after the trial was over. They said the story had changed their lives by teaching them how valuable and precious human life really is, and that our justice system is in place in order to make sure that people like James Biela are held responsible for their actions. These women said they felt they had me to thank for seeing the case through to closure.

As for me, I was nervous about the trial’s ending, but not just because I was waiting for a verdict. I knew that once the trial was over, so was my journalism career. Although I knew it was my choice to quit, I couldn’t help but feel as though I was about to be kicked out of an exclusive club. All the praise and appreciation I had been receiving from bloggers and my employers felt good, and I didn’t want the trial—or my moment in the spotlight—to end. I typed one last update before going home to Schuyler and Moo that night. I thought about Sheila as I typed.

KOLO:

Thanks for all of your support, everyone. I’m here for you, and I’ll be here until the trial finished. See you back here tomorrow.

I closed my laptop and headed home.
The morning of the verdict was gloomy. A typical late Spring storm brought a milky-colored sky and ice-cold raindrops, despite the fact that summer was only weeks away. The weather matched the somber moods of family members of both Brianna Denison and James Biela, who were waiting patiently near the courthouse while the jury deliberated.

I had paced around my house all morning, curling and then re-curling my hair, switching outfits, browsing the Internet, and waiting for my cell phone to ring. The jury had gone into the deliberating room at 4:30 the evening before, but headed home at 7:30 to sleep and think about the difficult decision they were being tasked with making. It couldn’t have been easy for them knowing that James Biela’s life was in their hands. They’d begun deliberating again at about 9:00 that morning, but still had yet to come to a decision. By noon that day, I finally couldn’t take it anymore. I settled on a simple black shirtdress and drove downtown to the courthouse to wait. I figured I could just sit outside in our station’s live truck so I could be the first reporter in the courtroom once the jury had made their decision. Unfortunately, I wasn’t the only ambitious journalist hoping to get the scoop.

“Join us, Auburn. We’re having a verdict waiting party,” said Brandon Rittiman, one of the reporters from Channel 2, and a man I considered to be my strongest competitor on the case.

I had just walked into a lounge room on the second floor of the courthouse where the bailiffs and other county employees often ate their lunches or took breaks. I needed to charge my laptop, so I figured I would just hang out indoors until my cell phone rang
with news of a verdict. I had no clue that every other journalist in the Reno market also
had the same idea.

“Oh. Uh, hey everyone,” I said, trying to hide the disappointment in my voice.

“Hey,” said several voices in the room. Martha Bellisle, a veteran courts and cops
reporter from the Reno Gazette Journal, looked up at me and smiled. She cleared off the
chair next to her and set a stack of papers on the floor.

“Have a seat,” she said. I sat down and opened up my laptop, plugging the cord
into the wall socket directly behind me.

Brandon Rittiman spoke up. “So the bailiff told us that the jury had lunch brought
in for them so they wouldn’t have to take a break. We were just taking bets on what they
ordered. My money is on Port-o-Subs.”

“Nah, I bet they got Taco Johns,” said Vicky Campbell, a reporter from Channel
4. “They seem like they’d be type of group that could put down some tacos.”

Laughing, we all took turns guessing what type of food the jury ate, and whether
or not their digestion patterns would weigh in on their verdict. Channel 2’s main prime
time anchor, Bill Brown, piped in with an old broadcast news cliché that we’d all heard
dozens of times over the years, mostly from veteran journalists.

“I don’t care what they eat, as long as they come up with a verdict soon,” he said.

“You know what they say. Ten bucks a head, don’t call us ‘till they’re dead!”

Rolling with laughter, another reporter from Channel 4 chimed in. “If it bleeds, it
leads!”

“Oh that’s an old classic,” said Vicky Campbell. “But you know what I always
like to say when I’m working in the newsroom? There’s no ‘I’ in ‘TEAM,’ but there are
three ‘U’s’ in ‘Shut the fuck up!’” Vicky laughed loudly as she smacked her palm on the table and took a long drink from her Diet Pepsi.

For the next couple of hours, the courthouse break room turned into our own private clubhouse. We laughed hysterically as we took turns telling funny stories about news packages gone wrong and embarrassingly bad live shots. We indulged in a bit of comic relief by critiquing the outfits and facial expressions of James Biela in court, and we joked about what his cellmate might do to him if he ended up in prison. While we knew that our conversation was insensitive and inappropriate, it was just what we needed to lighten the mood after what we’d been exposed to for the past two weeks in court. We’d sat through hundreds of gruesome photographs of Brianna Denison, heard hours of heartbreaking testimony from her loved ones, and witnessed dozens of her mother’s tears dripping down her face. Our laughter in the courthouse provided the comfort we needed to get through the rest of the trial. We still had to report the verdict and the sentencing, both portions of the process that would impact the lives of everyone involved in the case. While we were all competing against one another in our coverage of the trial, for those few hours while we laughed and talked, it felt like we were all on the same team. I felt a twinge of sadness knowing that this would probably be the last time I would ever sit in a room with these people. The truth was, these people weren’t my friends, and I knew that once I left the news business, I would likely never see or speak with any of them again. But despite these facts, I had grown to respect and appreciate them over the years, and I would miss them, quirks and all.
Suddenly, my thoughts were interrupted as all of our cell phones began ringing simultaneously. Our ring tones were all different lengths and volumes, and they rang at different intervals as we scrambled to answer them.

“Hello?” I said quickly, feeling flustered and out of breath.

“Hi Auburn, it’s Shelly from Judge Perry’s chambers. The jury has reached a verdict.” She hung up without waiting for a response.

I tossed my iPhone into the breast pocket of my dress and yanked the cord from my laptop, slamming it shut. Vicky, Brandon, Bill, Martha, and all of the other reporters in the room were making similar moves: slamming notebooks closed, zipping backpacks, and hurriedly hand combing their hair and applying lip gloss as they rushed toward the elevator. Once I had all of my belongings, I ran toward the back staircase in the courthouse and took the steps two at a time.

KOLO:
They have a verdict, everyone.

Comment from Belinda:
Let the motherfucker fry.

Comment from Joyce:
YEEESSSSSS!! Finally.

KOLO:
I just arrived in the courtroom and we’re waiting for all the key players to get here. The jury is still not in the room, but all of the victims and their families are here. James Biela’s family is also in the room. James is sitting
up front with his attorneys, and they’re whispering something in his ear.

Comment from MJ:
What are they saying?

Comment from suspected sociopath’s ex:
Justice will be served!

Comment from Kellen:
Thanks Auburn! Will this be broadcasted live?

The comments began coming in so quickly that I could no longer keep up with them. It was difficult to listen to and observe what was happening in the newsroom while trying to pay attention to all of the loyal Cover It Live bloggers who were anxious to hear the verdict.

KOLO:
I’m not going to approve comments for now. There are just too many. But I will continue to update you as the verdict is announced. Thanks again for reading!

The court bailiff stood and addressed the group of us sitting in the galley. “Ladies and gentlemen, while this is a very difficult day for everyone involved, I advise you to please keep your emotions in check when the verdict is read. There will be a lot of feelings, but please, there will be absolutely no outbursts in this courtroom. All rise for the honorable Judge Perry please.” He turned his back to us as the judge entered. “All rise for the jury.” The group of twelve jurors slowly filed in, looking down at their feet. Something told me that James Biela was not going to get off easy.
It was the moment I had been anticipating for more than two years, but now that it was here, I was beginning to wish it hadn’t come. My fingers were stiff, overused, and in desperate need of a break, but I knew that my mind, my dreams, and my every thought would remain consumed by the Denison family’s tragic story long after the case was closed. Part of me felt ready for the trial to end and a new chapter in life to begin, but the other part of me wished it could last forever. It felt like I had finally found balance in my career. In my coverage of the James Biela trial, I was able to please both Sheila and my bosses at KOLO. But unfortunately, this still didn’t change the fact that I was sitting in a room full of devastated family members.

I looked across the room at Brianna’s family in the front row. All of them were dressed up in what looked like church clothes, and they each had blue ribbons tied onto their shirt collars and dresses. They looked exhausted—physically and emotionally—and they seemed ready to put the trial behind them. In front of me, James Biela’s mother looked still and lifeless. While there was no doubt that Brianna’s family were the main victims in this case, I believed that James Biela’s mother was a victim as well. As I stared at the back of her head, I thought about how she could have been anyone’s mom. While what her son was accused of was a terrible and inexcusable crime, it wasn’t her fault that he killed someone. Evidence raised in court claimed that James had been abused by his father as a child, but his mother had been victimized too. I could only imagine how she was feeling that morning as she wondered, waited and dreaded the jury’s decision. Despite the satisfaction I felt at having covered the trial in a way that I felt was responsible and fair, it didn’t erase the pain that both families were dealing with. The thought irked me.
KOLO:
The bailiff just handed the verdict form to Judge Perry. He is going to read it.

KOLO: Nerves...


The courtroom remained silent other than a few quiet gasps and deep breaths from the audience members in the galley. The jury had found James Biela guilty on all five counts. It shouldn’t have been surprising, but somehow it came as a shock. But even more than that, it was a huge relief. If James had been acquitted, I imagined there would have been complete chaos in the courtroom and the community. I pictured Sheilas chanting and carrying torches while they marched in the streets, begging for a retrial. There could have been no other outcome than this one.

KOLO: James’ parents are looking down. There are tears. The victims are crying. Brianna’s grandmother is sniffling. James is just looking forward, leaning downward. Not much reaction. The first rape victim is looking very happy and smiling.

Comment from Sue: It was a long time coming but he finally got what he deserves.
Comment from Tess: Thank God the justice system prevailed here.

Judge Perry announced that court was adjourned until 2:30 that afternoon, which is when the penalty phase would begin. The bailiff stood and spoke. “Court is now in recess, ladies and gentlemen.” Immediately, the shuffling of feet and papers began. Brandon and Vicky both jumped from their seats next to me and squeezed their way through the aisle toward Brianna’s family, who were now standing and embracing one another openly. Martha slammed her laptop shut and rushed toward the prosecuting attorneys, her tape recorder already rolling. I panicked, realizing that I was about to get scooped. I knew that I too was expected to get sound bites from the victims, as well as the family members of James Biela. I had become so caught up in my Cover It Live blog that I forgotten that my real job as a television reporter was still to collect video and interviews for our nightly newscast. My stomach tightened at the thought. After all I had accomplished during the past two weeks, I didn’t want to reenter my past as a brazen, pushy journalist who intruded in people’s personal grief. But I knew if I were going to leave my position without burning any bridges, I would have to do just that.

In the back of the courtroom, I could see the first rape victim in the case hugging James Biela’s former girlfriend, both of them crying. Since all of my competitors preoccupied with other interviews, I knew this was my chance. My former self might have run up to them abruptly, microphone in hand, but instead, I approached them gently. Feeling awkward and uncharacteristically nervous, I spoke. “You must be excited?” I asked them, realizing as I said it that excited probably wasn’t quite the right word. I tried
again. “Um, would either of you be interested in doing an interview with KOLO, either on or off camera? I can hide your identity if you’d like.”

They both looked at me with cold eyes, and then at each other before James’ ex-girlfriend finally responded.

“Hi Auburn,” she said. “Thank you for being respectful of our privacy. You’ve done a really great job on this trial, and we appreciate you keeping our names private in your coverage. But this is over now and we would like to move on with our lives. So no. Absolutely not. Can you please just go away and let us have a moment to ourselves?” She clasped her hands together and turned her back to me, signaling the end of our conversation.

“Yeah sure,” I said, pausing for a second while I thought of an appropriate response. My face was red with shame and I felt predatory as I stood there, motionless in front of these two grieving women. “I completely understand. Thanks anyway, and I wish you the best,” I said, giving a polite smile and walking away. I headed over to a gaggle of reporters that were surrounding James Biela’s mother and brother, and overheard the mention of a group interview with them scheduled in ten minutes. It was my last assignment as a reporter, so I knew I was going to have to put aside my pride and do what was expected of me.

The news package I put together for the evening newscast that night contained a tear-filled interview with James Biela’s mother, as well as a few reaction sound bites from Lauren Denison and the prosecuting attorneys. We showed clips of the families leaving the courthouse, followed by blurry transitions to photographs of Brianna’s smiling face. The KOLO promotions department put together a series of short
commercials that highlighted our coverage of the trial, claiming our superiority over the competing stations. “KOLO brought you the very best coverage in Northern Nevada. We took you into the courtroom with Auburn Hutton’s live minute-to-minute blog, keeping you in the loop as the trial unfolded,” the commercial boasted. The other stations aired similar commercials, creating the all too familiar tug of war over which station is the best. The ads sickened me. After all I had done to be an ethical, responsible journalist during the trial, here we were, exploiting the families once again. As I blogged during the court proceedings, I truly felt I was doing a service to the community by giving them access to “just the facts” of what was happening in court. But in the end, just as we had always done in the past, we were still using tragedy as a method to bring in viewers. While this thought depressed me, it also made me realize that leaving television news was the right decision.

My final days on the job were emotional for me. While I couldn’t wait to be a full time graduate student, I also knew the transition out of the journalism world was going to be hard. The James Biela trial encompassed everything I loved and hated about my job. During the trial, I had the lead newscast story every night, and I felt appreciated by my coworkers and the community viewers who were reading and commenting on my blog. I felt important as I entered the courthouse each day, and proud of myself for doing something that no other TV station or newspaper was doing. I finally felt good about the way in which I was reaching Sheila and the other audience members. But in the end, I realized that nothing had really changed. While it was fine to experiment with media and try something new, the old methods were still what the station managers and the corporate leaders were expecting. And underneath all of the fancy news coverage and
blogs and commercials, there were still three victims and three families who were

grieving. While the news publicity had helped local law enforcement make progress in
solving the murder, the Denison family had still lost Brianna for good. She was gone, and
nothing was ever going to bring her back.

James Biela was sentenced to death on June 2, 2010. The jury unanimously

agreed that capital punishment was the only appropriate sentence for a man who had
committed such violent crimes. After the guilty verdict, the penalty phase of the trial
began, and the outcome was really no surprise. I thought about Sheila a lot during my last
few days of work. I hoped she was taking a break from television after being glued to the
trial coverage for the past few weeks. I had done my best for her, and I was determined to
leave my job on a high note. After I finished up my last television live shot and signed off
for the night, I wrote one final blog entry.

KOLO: The last few weeks have been surreal. Aside from

practically living out of a laptop case at the Washoe

County District Courthouse, typing nonstop for an average

of seven hours a day, and watching a man be sentenced to
dehth by a group of strangers, I also was lucky enough to

witness a community coming together in a way I’ve never

seen. I have been covering the murder case of Brianna

Denison since the day she disappeared in January 2008. I

remember the rumors, the speculation, and the pictures of

the beautiful college student that vanished off a couch in

the night. I remember how for weeks, even months, I spent
nearly every day doing interviews with her family members, and following around search and rescue volunteers as they combed parks, neighborhoods, and playgrounds. Many of these volunteers didn’t know Brianna Denison or her family. But they told me it’s what they would have wanted if their child were to disappear.

When James Biela was arrested in November of 2008, I got a frantic midnight phone call from my assignment editor. “They caught someone who they think is responsible for Brianna’s murder,” he said. “See you early in the morning.” I didn’t go back to sleep that night. I lay there in bed, shocked that the police had finally found their guy. By then, Brianna had been missing for almost nine months. The entire community had been tormented daily by her strange disappearance. We knew then that two other rape victims had also come forward, and that they too were anxiously hoping for closure. I knew that even though a man was behind bars, the story was long from being over.

My decision to cover the trial for James Biela wasn’t taken lightly. I knew there was a possibility that it could be moved to Las Vegas or another city with a less-tainted jury pool. With tough economic times, I knew I might be staying in a seedy motel, eating fast food, and enduring
weeks of sleepless nights. But I didn’t care about any of that. I knew somehow, that aside from many trials that come and go, people would be watching this one closely. I owed it to the community to do the best job I could. Normally, when TV stations like ours cover a high-profile trial, we give our viewers bits and pieces of what happens in court, tiny snapshots of riveting testimony, and glimpses of reaction from the victim’s families. We leave the courtroom in the afternoon, burdened with the technology involved with putting together a TV story. We have to log tape, write a script, record our voice, edit, and then cake on piles of makeup before we stand in front of the bright TV lights. All of this while crossing our fingers that the generator won’t break or the battery won’t run out of juice and destroy an entire day of work in a split second. But this trial was different. The managers at KOLO decided what the viewers is Reno really needed this time was someone who could bring them into the courtroom. I have no doubt in my mind that if as many people in Reno who wanted to watch the trial could have been there, we could have filled up every seat at Mackay Stadium. Instead, dozens of close family and friends often had to wait outside in the hallway while the testimony continued, desperately wanting to hear and see
the action in the courtroom. That’s where I came in. Aside from everything I was taught in journalism school, and aside from all I’ve learned during my five-year tenure as a television reporter, I decided to just tell people what I saw and heard, and forget about analyzing attorney tactics and asking leading questions in order to inspire riveting sound bites. Instead, I typed as fast as I could, jotting down nearly every word spoken, no matter how seemingly insignificant or small. If I saw a family member grab a tissue or leave the room for a particularly graphic photograph shown to the jury, I wrote that down too. If James Biela smiled or whispered to his attorneys, I recorded it. Never in a million years did I think so many people would be reading. After fifteen full days in court, from jury selection to the death penalty verdict, more than 17,000 people were following my blog, people from not just Reno, but also from across the states, places like Vermont, Florida, and even Canada. Almost 7,000 of them replayed the day’s blog after court adjourned for the day. 6,000 people made comments. And on average, readers spent an hour-and-a-half of straight, uninterrupted time reading what I had to say. Sure, it wasn’t colorfully written or fancy, and although I haven’t counted, I’d estimate there were at
least as many spelling mistakes as readers. But it was quick, it was honest, and it allowed people who cared about Brianna Denison, and who care about this community, to be in the courtroom with me. I established a relationship with these committed blog followers. Some of them whose names popped up in the blog again and again became my cyber-friends. I imagined what they looked like, where they were sitting as they read, and what it was about the case that had them so hooked to this trial. By blogging, I was providing a service to the community, one that I will never forget.

The trial is now over, and James Biela will soon be living on death row. Brianna’s family is elated with the news, but his family is devastated. The community as a whole is breathing a sigh of relief, happy to see our justice system prevail, but sad that the tragic events of 2007 and 2008 ever had to happen in the first place. As for me, my fingers are tired and my brain feels fried, but I’ll never forget the experience of covering this trial. It renewed my sense of faith in what journalists are capable of, and it gave me a new appreciation as for why people in Reno are such a tight knit bunch. We care about each other and it shows. I’m off to graduate school at UNR in the
fall, pursuing a degree in writing, a passion of mine that I just can’t help but follow. I’ll miss being a full-time journalist, but I hope to make some brief guest appearances on KOLO-TV in the future. I’ll continue to follow this case, as well as what happens to James Biela, and all of the families impacted by his trial. And I will continue to write. After all, the past couple of years have given me what feels like a lifetime of material. Thank you to everyone who followed the blog closely. You all inspire me. Good luck in life. Sincerely, Auburn Hutton.
At first, I avoided the news. After I left my job at KOLO, I swore I would never tune in to watch my former coworkers stumble through yet another dry newscast filled with performance flubs and technical errors. I felt too close to the product to watch it with a blind eye, and besides, I had fully immersed myself in my new life as a full-time graduate student. I was living the life of a scholar; riding my bike to campus, poring over textbooks at coffee shops and at the library, and staying up late to finish midterm papers. While a tiny part of me missed the daily grind of being a full-time newscaster, I was loving how much free time I had to do the things I enjoyed, like cooking, exercising and sewing. But not long after I began my new life as a student, Schuyler and I found out we would be starting another new career, that of being parents. And it wasn’t until my son, Canyon, was about six months old that I finally began to pay attention to the news again.

Anyone who has ever had a baby knows that the first few months are the hardest. It’s sort of an out of body experience. You become so focused on what seems like 24-hour-a-day breastfeeding, trying to squeeze in sleep anywhere possible, and listening for every breath your child takes, that you hardly have time to do anything you used to enjoy in your child-less life. Time moves incredibly slowly, yet strangely, the days fly by. I had been living in the new baby bubble for half of a year, and I was up to my elbows in dirty diapers and pureed food. I had never been more out of the loop or less informed about what was going on in the world outside of the four walls of our home. Since I’d left KOLO, I’d been slowly plugging away toward my master’s degree, while also teaching part-time composition classes to college freshman at Truckee Meadows Community College (TMCC). And on top of that, I was taking care of Canyon. I used to find it
irritating when people would say that being a mother is a full-time job. It wasn’t until I became a mother that I realized how true that really is. My life became a juggling act. When I wasn’t playing peek-a-boo, washing diapers or making baby food, I was correcting essays or reading journal articles for one of my English seminars. As a journalist, I thought I knew what it was like to be stressed out, overworked and underpaid. Being a mother was ten times harder. But while multi-tasking as a working professional was bothersome and frustrating, the maneuvering and shuffling that I did as a homemaker was manageable and fulfilling. All of the sleepless nights and hard work were worth it because I knew they were benefitting my family.

Nevertheless, somehow the news crept back into my life. Each day around 5:00, I caught myself doing something I never imagined I would do: flipping on the television to watch the evening primetime newscast. At first, my reluctant loyalty to KOLO still stuck with me. I watched as my old coworkers stumbled over news copy that I imagined myself delivering so much more efficiently. I laughed to myself at their mediocre coverage of fluffy events and felt tiny pangs of jealousy seeing my pretty replacements with their shiny hair glowing in front of the bright lights. As time went by, I began to flip around back and forth between Channel 8, Channel 4 and Channel 2, giving my own critique of their story line-ups and checking out all the new reporters and anchors. It didn’t take me long to realize that not much had changed. With or without me, TV news was just as I had left it.

But one particular evening, while Canyon spewed bits of spinach at me between open-handed slaps on his high chair tray, I heard the reporter say something along the lines of, “If you’re thinking of opening up a college account for your young child, you
better pay attention.” I froze, dropping the soft, rubber-covered spoon on the floor. What? Me, the recipient of a relevant news fact on the evening news? It couldn’t be. But it was true. Schuyler and I had been struggling to figure out which type of college account would be best to open up for Canyon. We’d been procrastinating because there was so much information to sort through, and we just didn’t have a lot of free time to sort through it. So I needed this information. I wanted to pay attention. The moment was revolutionary for me.

While I once fancied myself as being too good for watching TV news, I suddenly witnessed firsthand why television broadcast news is so appealing to Sheila. Staying at home caring for children all day makes it difficult to muster up the patience for long, complicated and drawn out news stories like those found in The New York Times or some other elite, national publication. Short, easily digested blurbs are about all a busy mother has time for. I remember the KOLO consultants telling me that broadcast writing needed to be written in active voice, using simple vocabulary so that people who were only listening to the newscast—and not watching the screen—could still understand what the stories were about. This finally made sense to me. Often, the newscast would become background noise that merged with the domestic symphony in our kitchen: the baby babbling, the dog barking, the teapot screaming. Only when something interested me or related to me directly did I actually look up at the television and listen carefully.

After the college account story aired, I began paying closer attention to the news content. The majority of the time, I still caught myself rolling my eyes during the newscast as I noticed misspellings in the over-the-shoulder graphics, or snickering to myself when I saw yet another stale, repeated story that I’d covered multiple times during
my tenure as a broadcaster. But every once in a while, the stories that aired were
appealing to me, and got me to stop, think and listen. Often, I would log on to the Internet
after a newscast to read the story in depth through a different news source, one with more
credibility and a larger slot for news content, like The Washington Post or The Chicago
Sun-Times. When KOLO aired a national package about a woman who was humiliated at
a Target store in Texas when she openly breastfed her infant son, I quit folding laundry
and turned up the TV. It was a Sheila story like no other, and yet I cared deeply about it. I
wondered, did this mean I too was becoming a Sheila? Probably. If so, then I was certain
we had misjudged her. I wasn’t ignorant, apathetic or stupid, but yet there I was,
watching television news. So what did that say about the content of most newscasts?
Who were journalists really reaching when they talked down to their viewers? I had a
feeling that out of the dwindling number of viewers who were still left watching
television news, most of them were probably judging it just as harshly as I was.

Over the course of just a couple of years, I had transformed from a news reporter to
a news consumer. From the outside looking in, I could see that television news was
severely underperforming. Most of the newscasts were saturated with high-drama crime
stories, gruesome car accidents and political fallout. Weather seemed to fill up giant
sections of the newscasts, but the forecasters repeated themselves so many times that it
became irritating to watch. Because of the existence of the Internet, most of what I saw
on an evening newscast was old news by the time it aired. Out of all the stories that aired
on KOLO in a given week, maybe only one or two of them would appeal to me. It was
easy for me to see why TV news viewership has continued to decrease over the years.
There is very little reason for anyone to keep watching, especially Sheila. Television
news isn’t teaching her much that she doesn’t already know, so what is the point of watching? In my new role as a part-time television news viewer, I felt ripped off. I missed seeing the type of stories that I had begun to cover during my last few months as a television reporter. I wanted straightforward stories, facts and smart interpretation of relevant events and happenings. I wanted local, national and international news, but not necessarily in that order. And even more than those things, I wanted to hear about culture and green technology. I wanted to learn about the art and music events happening in my community, the future of our recycling program, and the arrival of new local businesses that were popping up all over town. Those were the stories I enjoyed covering the most at KOLO, and because I was no longer employed there, no one seemed to be doing them anymore. The consultants were probably still telling the news staff that Sheila doesn’t care about those things, but that she’s the person worth attracting. I realized that if I wanted to take in the kind of news content that was important to me, I would have to look someplace other than television. I can only assume that Sheila had come to a similar conclusion.

Canyon is more than a year old now, and my life has gotten easier. I think I’ve finally gotten the hang of this mothering gig, and I finally have more time to myself. If I’m not at the library’s weekly story time, the playground, or the Discovery Museum, I usually spend my free time doing housework, reading, cooking or crafting. That being said, I still turn the news on every so often, mostly just out of curiosity. And still, not much has changed. Many of the same news anchors are still there, delivering the same stories they have year after year, except with new suits and new haircuts. I still see stories
that pander to Sheila in the most obvious way imaginable, and I still see exploitation of tragedy.

I remember one particular story in November of 2011 when a 500-acre fire broke out in Southwest Reno, threatening thousands of homes. The fire’s perimeter ended less than a mile from our home, so needless to say, I was very interested in watching the coverage on television. I flipped on KOLO, hoping to learn about how quickly the flames were spreading, and whether or not I needed to think about gathering my things to evacuate. But I was immediately disgusted with what I saw and heard.

“When the fire broke out in the middle of the night, we were on the air within one hour. We’ve continued to bring you wall-to-wall coverage until 4:30 this morning,” boasted the blonde news anchor, smiling brightly.

Ugh, I thought. Thousands of people are in fear of losing their life and homes, and yet KOLO is spending precious airtime bragging about how great their coverage is. I flipped to Channel 2, hoping they would have more information about the fire.

“We were first to the story,” said the anchor, “and we will continue to bring you the best coverage in Northern Nevada.”

I sighed loudly and switched to Channel 4.

“Our morning reporter has been working incredibly hard today. She’s been on the air since very early this morning, so she had to go home and get some rest. Kudos to her for staying on this story,” said the anchor, before bragging about Channel 4 scooping the other stations on the fire.

Not one of the three stations was doing their job. This was real news, and a chance for them to excel. But instead, there they were, failing to deliver important information
about the fire, while simultaneously touting their ability to outperform the other stations. Even in a tragedy where people’s homes and lives are at stake, the news stations still couldn’t let go of their intense desire to compete. I imagined Sheila and her family flipping off their televisions in disgust.

It’s been more than two years since I left my job at KOLO. There are days when I miss being a television reporter; times when my life as a full-time mother and part-time English teacher just isn’t fulfilling enough. I miss the chaos, the adrenaline rush, and the accomplished feeling at the end of a newscast where I nailed a live shot that introduced a killer, leading story. I also miss being informed, aware and “in the know” about things. Sometimes I think I may not be done with journalism for good, but that perhaps I needed to take a break in order to see journalism from the outside and realize the potential good it has to offer. I know that newspapers, television and radio are important to our society—or at least they once were—but they’re just not living up to their fullest expectations.

Quitting has softened me, matured me, and made me less jaded. I spend a little less time looking for news stories, and a little more time looking at my family and the wonderful world around me. I cook more, travel more, read more and spend more time smiling. I’m a much happier, more fulfilled person. But I don’t regret the time I spent in journalism either. It was a wonderful experience, and I got to do many things in my somewhat short-lived career that many people can only dream about. I’ve climbed up Mount Rushmore, held a baby leopard, ridden in a hot air balloon, and even interviewed then-presidential candidate Barack Obama. But what I value even more than those things is the fact that I met hundreds of incredibly normal, everyday people with fascinating
stories to tell. Much more than wildfires, elections, plane crashes, and even the James Biela murder trial, I hold onto my memories of the people who made headlines for making a positive impact on their families, their community and their world. The stories I remember and appreciate the most have nothing to do with death or scandal, and everything to do with creating a community that attempts to better itself, expand its horizons, and take care of its own people. I like to think that those are the stories Sheila remembers most as well.

While Sheila and I don’t talk anymore, we’re not completely out of touch. I run into her constantly; at the weekend farmer’s market, the local bookstore, the Nevada Museum of Art, and even in my own classroom at TMCC. Many of my students fit the profile: middle-aged mothers back in school after their children have all grown up. But despite the fact that the consultants always taught me that Sheila is apathetic and unintelligent, the Sheilas I have met are anything but. The Sheilas I see fill their grocery carts with healthy fruits and vegetables, check out library books to help their children become better readers, and spend five mornings a week huffing and puffing on the treadmill at my local gym. These are the women who the KOLO consultants are pandering to, and yet, they seem much smarter, more capable and more motivated than anyone predicted. I know they watch the news sometimes because I’ve seen them. At the gym, the middle-aged blonde grabs a remote and changes one of the overhead televisions to Channel 4 every morning. In my classroom, many of my Sheila moms write assigned weekly reflection essays on news stories they watched on KOLO or one of the other local stations. While the consultants may have been partially right about who is watching the news these days, I believe they are wrong about how these women are watching it. My
Sheila students constantly tell me how disgusted they are with television news coverage, and how they’re sick of seeing the same stories aired year after year, over and over again. They tell me how they believe television news is silly and sensationalized, and that they wish the stories aired on TV were filled with more quality content and less celebrity news gossip and self-promotional banter. I tell them honestly that I wish that too.

When I quit being a journalist, I swore that I would never step foot inside a newsroom again. Now two years later, I’m not so sure. The world of journalism is changing rapidly, as it has been for decades. If my former career field were to revolutionize enough—and for the better—the current event obsessed, news hungry, go-getter I once was could very well resurface. A different type of journalism might be just a little bit more enticing than the career I made a choice to leave behind. While television news, in my opinion, is becoming more and more obsolete, there are other forms of news that continue to get better. I still enjoy listening to news on National Public Radio (NPR) any chance I get. The content is smarter, deeper, and much more informative than just about anything aired on TV. If Sheila were to listen to NPR instead of watching television news, she’d take in much more enriching and important content over all. Then there is the vast Internet, which is unstoppable; news of any kind—some reliable, some not—can be found with the click of a mouse. Sites like Huffington Post and Salon.com offer real news, combined with culture, arts and entertainment, but delivered in a smart manner. They allow anyone—and most certainly Sheila—to read about things that are important to them, without being belittled or talked down to.

When I think about the possibility of a future in journalism, I fantasize about a dream job where I am able to do the type of smart, meaningful stories I enjoyed so much
toward the end of my career. This ideal job takes on many forms in my mind. Sometimes, I like to imagine myself working as a national correspondent for NPR, a job where I would report on serious international stories that the major networks so often ignore. Other times, I picture myself as a free-spirited documentarian, lugging around a camera and a backpack while conducting lengthy interviews about controversial subjects that local news stations are afraid to tackle in fear of upsetting advertisers. And other times, I imagine working as the host of a nightly news program geared specifically toward Sheila. The show would be filled with deep, meaningful stories about local arts & culture, health, family, as well as new green and progressive community developments. In my perfect job, it wouldn’t matter if I was pretty or skinny, and no one would care what I was wearing on the air. The show would be judged on its inner content, not its outer appearance. During my show, I wouldn’t talk down to Sheila like the correspondents have so often recommended. Instead I would deliver smart, responsible content, and I would invite Sheila to become part of the conversation. If it were truly my perfect job, there would be no advertisements or commercial breaks either. Unfortunately, I know all too well that a show like this would probably be impossible to sustain. Without advertisers, television news would fade away completely. That’s why the future of journalism—and especially television journalism—is still cloudy in my vision.

That being said, I don’t necessarily believe that television journalism is a completely lost cause. While the content of daily newscasts is lacking the depth and variety that our newspaper and Internet counterparts contain, once in awhile, when a really big news story breaks, the community, the country and the world become glued to it. Somehow when this happens, American journalists are still able to rise to the occasion
and deliver the type of coverage that makes a positive difference. So while I once swore off journalism for good, I no longer discount it as a possible future career option. Given the right opportunity, I just might consider reappearing on the airwaves or in a byline. And if I do, I’ll do it responsibly and compassionately or not at all. And I’ll think of Sheila every step of the way.
When I first began working on Writing for Sheila, I was still working full time to please her. I was trained to sell stories to Sheila, even if that meant sacrificing my own journalistic integrity. I remember wondering if I was the only person who could see right through these unethical and irresponsible practices that all broadcast journalists seemed to be engaged in. But once I quit my job and began making substantial progress on Writing for Sheila, I began to see things from an outsider’s point of view, and I realized that I was not alone in my criticism of the media. Through research, I discovered a blatant disconnection between the perception that American journalists have about their viewers and reality. Television journalists rely on greedy corporate researchers to tell them who is watching their newscasts and when. Based on those results, managers make major programming decisions based on biased and unreliable research methods that help both the consultants and the television station owners make loads of money, but that do nothing to help inform and enlighten the public. The consultants tell the television news directors that Sheila is the only type of person who is tuning into their newscasts, and so they should target their news content in order to please her. And then they say that Sheila is a woman with no education, no common sense, and no deep-rooted values, which means the news content need not be deep, smart or informative. I disagree wholeheartedly with both of these assertions, and I believe television newscasters should be responsible for serving the public’s best interest instead of corporate businesses that only have their own profit in mind. I argue that many Sheilas are much more sophisticated than the corporate consultants give her credit for. Furthermore, the research methods used by TV consultants are unscientific, ineffective and highly misleading.
Television ratings research has been around since television was invented, but despite that, it has not improved much over time. Historically, TV stations relied on deceptive techniques in order to count their audience size. According to the authors of *Ratings Analysis: Theory and Practice*, “Some counted fan mail, others simply reported the population, or number of receivers sold, in their market. Each of these methods was unreliable and invited exaggeration” (Webster & Lichty 69). Nowadays, there are a variety of methods used to collect data about viewers, and the methods are constantly changing to adapt to new technologies. When VCRs and satellite television came along and enabled TV viewers to skip past advertisements, even more adjustments to research had to be made. Neilsen, Arbitron, Tivo, DirecTV and other companies now use methods such as set-top boxes, direct mail diaries, and online video tracking devices to attempt to measure how frequently people watch television, as well as how engaged they are while doing it. The authors of *Rating the Audience* explain how this process is meant to measure viewership numbers. “The meter in the home records and stores all broadcast viewing: the time, date, whether the television set is on/off and the channel to which each television set is tuned” (Balnavez, O’Regan, Goldsmith 102). Unfortunately, these meters don’t account for the multi-tasking that many people engage in today. Modern technologies and busy lifestyles have made it extremely difficult to track exactly how, where and when people receive news content. Technological advances such as the Internet have made it possible for people to get news updates instantaneously and from a variety of sources. Online blogs and social networking websites have transformed every user into an individual journalist of sorts, making it possible for them to stay informed without ever needing to pick up a newspaper or watch a television newscast. Because of
this, television news is becoming more and more obsolete. It’s no longer convenient or
feasible for every person to sit down each evening at the same time and watch a 30-
minute television news program. Plus, by the time the 5:00 o’clock evening newscast
airs, much of the content is already “old news.” So instead, viewers may only listen to a
newscast while they do other things like cook dinner, check their Facebook account on
their laptop, read Twitter updates on their cell phone, and browse their favorite news
website on their Kindle or iPad. Recent studies have shown that the news audience of
today is “computer, internet and mobile savvy, well rehearsed in moving from big screen
to small screen, from one application to another” (Balnavez, O’Regan, Goldsmith 201).
This newfound media independence means people can selectively choose the source of
their news based on their own interests, value systems and media preference. This is just
one reason that old methods for ratings research are no longer accurate indicators of how
well-read, informed or intelligent the audience is. So if we can’t trust the research, then
how can we trust what the consultants tell us about Sheila?

Aside from statistical analysis, ratings companies like Nielsen also like to dig into
the personal lives of American television viewers by phoning them for interviews or
asking them to fill out lengthy surveys about their media habits. According to the authors
of Rating the Audience, TV viewers once considered these surveys to be a responsibility,
not a choice. “The appeal to civic duty was not accidental. People were surrendering their
time and privacy to provide details to the ratings provider” (Balnavez, O’Regan,
Goldsmith 206). Nowadays, the resistance to these random surveys has increased.
Research has shown a 40 percent decline in responses since 1996, stemming from factors
such as caller ID, unlisted numbers, answering machines and gated communities, as well
as “too many demands from survey researchers; respondents being too busy to meet the
demands; concerns about misrepresentation and privacy” (209). In a world that is
overflowing with forms, surveys and questionnaires, some people are simply too busy to
fill out another one. Others believe it’s risky to give out personal information about
themselves and their media habits. In order to increase the number of responses, Neilsen
even offers payment to families who participate in their mail survey. When I was still
working as a reporter at KOLO, I received one of these envelopes in the mail, and I was
shocked to find a crisp five-dollar bill pressed inside between the sheets. Because I was a
member of the media, I was forbidden to participate, but I admit, I kept the $5.00
anyway. I suspect that many other people do the same thing. Without a wide variety of
survey responders, Nielsen and other ratings providers are unable to get a solid sample of
the population, which means their research results are meaningless, and therefore, their
appraisal of Sheila is null as well.

The extra effort put forth by television stations during a ratings sweep period is
another reason that ratings research is inauthentic. In order to provide an estimate for the
audience size and demographic, companies like Nielsen will decide on a month-long
ratings sweep period for data collection. “The dates of each sweep are known well in
advance, so local stations can and do adapt their programming to attract the largest
audiences possible during each sweep” (Webster & Lichty 128). I can remember many
ratings sweep periods during my tenure as a journalist, and it was always a stressful time
in the newsroom. No one was allowed to take vacation during sweeps, and we were all
required to file extra stories both on-air and on-line, all of which were heavily promoted
during commercial breaks during our newscasts and throughout the day and night. The
promotional commercials were produced by our creative department—which worked alongside our sales department—to make sure the right demographics were targeted. The stories we did were often so sensationalized and over-dramatized that it was almost impossible not to watch them. Because of this, the higher results of a typical ratings sweep are not necessarily consistent with the lower ratings a television station might get if they weren’t preparing for sweeps and formulating their news content to lure people in. This shows just how distorted the results of ratings research really is.

While the ratings providers give media outlets inaccurate results, the corporate consultants and station managers are also inaccurately interpreting that data. To shed light on this problem, I’d like to reflect back on a moment in my TV career history that was just about a year after the Atlanta consultants came to KOLO and introduced us to Sheila. By that point, our station managers and reporters had adjusted to the direction given to us by the consultants. We were told that if we catered to this ideal viewer named Sheila, we would get the highest ratings scores, and therefore, make the most money for commercial advertisements. All three television stations in Reno were scrambling for that number one news slot. I remember our news director holding a mandatory, station-wide meeting to announce the results of that ratings cycle. We all piled into the news studio and crowded around the station managers to hear the news, expecting the worst and hoping for the best. Dave Beech—who was news director at that time—told us that KOLO’s prime time newscast had once again scraped its way back up into the number one rated newscast slot for Northern Nevada. In a confusing speech filled with technical ratings language, Dave attempted to explain the rating system to a group of busy, deadline-chasing reporters with unfinished stories hanging over our exhausted heads. “If
you look here at this chart,” Dave said, pointing at the tiny, impossible-to-read print on
the black and white page in front of him, “you can see that in the 35-50 year old female
category, we are number one for the morning show as well as our 5:00 and 6:30 weekday
newscasts. Congratulations team, we are number one again!” He continued to explain the
black and white chart to us, claiming that our news station was rated number one in every
category. He did this by specifying age groups, gender and time slots, which made it easy
to claim number one in each section, even if our station really wasn’t the most popular or
the most often watched newscast for that time frame. Dave made it clear that the most
important thing was for us to be number one in the “Sheila” category. I remember feeling
a mixture of relieved, confused and excited about the results, but also very skeptical since
it was my understanding that our station had been losing money for many years. I knew
this because dozens of employees had been laid off, overtime had been cut, and a hiring
freeze had been put in place. Our station’s general manager hadn’t thrown a KOLO
Christmas party that year because he said there wasn’t enough money to support one. I
couldn’t understand how we could be rated number one, yet still broke from a lack of
advertising dollars. That evening while chatting with a rival reporter from Channel 2, I
learned that our news director wasn’t the only one in town who was calling for
celebration. The news director at Channel 2 had thrown a champagne toast party the
evening before to celebrate his station’s emergence as the number one rated station in
Northern Nevada. Then while talking with Channel 4 reporters over the course of the
next week, I learned that their station managers had also told them that their station was
rated number one. I knew that there could really only be one #1 slot, so how was it that
all three local stations had interpreted the data differently? Simple. It’s because having
high ratings helps sell advertisements. According to the authors of *Rating the Audience*, corporate consultants provide television news stations with information that is “a cross between an auditor of its books and a seller of its information to third parties such as advertisers. Media proprietors are naturally vitally interested in a ratings convention that presents their *best* case” (Balnavez, O’Regan, Goldsmith 241). This is precisely why Dave Beech and the other two local news directors all wanted to boast about having landed the slot of number one news station. They knew that if they could somehow interpret the ratings in their favor, then the sales department for the station would be able to charge more for commercial spots. Furthermore, if television stations like KOLO can claim a number one slot for a specific demographic—such as the Sheila category—then they can more easily sell advertisements that are targeted toward her, and for a higher profit. Make no mistake about it: television stations are businesses. They make their money by selling advertising space that fills up the gaps in between stories and weather segments in their newscast. “Broadcasters sell audiences. Despite some appearances to the contrary, that is the single most important activity of the business” (Webster & Lichty 4). This is additional evidence that the information gleaned from corporate media consultants cannot be trusted.

Because we can discredit the methods of television researchers, we can also disregard their evaluation of Sheila, the standard prototype for an ideal television audience member. They see her as shallow, apathetic, uncultured and unrefined. But this model of Sheila is an outdated archetype that files all homemakers into a single category without allowing for any personal differences and tastes. I refuse to accept the notion that *every* Sheila is an uncaring, unmotivated, unintelligent housewife. Media consultants
seem to be pandering to a stereotypical 1950’s housewife version of Sheila, where many of today’s women are much more progressive, educated, and career oriented.

Furthermore, many of the Sheilas who I have had the pleasure of getting to know are by no means simple or one-dimensional. Education levels are not the only determining factor in a person’s intelligence or depth. I met a wide range of Sheilas during my tenure as a broadcast journalist, and while yes, sure, some of them might have fit the depiction created by the money-hungry consultants and researchers, many of them did not. The mother I interviewed in a South Dakota sushi restaurant as she tried her first piece of Midwestern nigiri was by no means sheltered or unsophisticated. The hundreds of women I interviewed during the search for Brianna Denison weren’t apathetic or dense in the least. In fact, they were some of the most compassionate, bright and resourceful women I’ve ever known. I use myself as an example too, because I also fall under the consultants’ category of a “Sheila.” Sure, I am a stay-at-home mother who sometimes watches television news, but I am also a motivated and diligent graduate student who cares greatly about the environment, culture and world news. I also have many friends who watch television news and also qualify as Sheilas, but they’re neither unintelligent nor ignorant. My dear friend Heather—a mother of one with another baby now on the way—scours headlines on Huffington Post during her free time, works out seven days a week, and regularly reads ambitious pieces of literature like Anna Karenina and War and Peace. She is hardly the impulsive couch potato the consultants describe her as. Another friend, Lindy, gave birth to her second child only a few weeks ago, and despite the fact that she is responsible for staying home and taking care of two children, she makes time to listen to NPR every day, regularly runs, and cooks nutritious meals for her family
every night. She certainly isn’t lounging on her couch eating bon bons while she watches the local newscast. Despite what the consultants say about stay-at-home mothers, women are human beings and come in many shapes and forms. They cannot be classified and confined into one small group.

By over-generalizing and stereotyping Sheila, news consultants are also negatively affecting the type of content that hits the airwaves. Old-fashioned television research relies on tired clichés and misconceptions about what a “typical” housewife is like, and consequently, television news content is being created for an ideal audience of lazy, uneducated stay-at-home moms. The idea of this “typical” housewife has been around since the 1920’s when televisions first became available to the general public. As soon as advertisements made their first appearances on the airwaves, many of them were directed toward the mothers and wives who stayed at home and took care of domestic duties. Marketing specialists attempted to learn as much as they could about the typical housewife, including her habits, schedules, and motivations, in order to mold commercial content around her interests. They used these descriptions and other statistics to predict her actions, including what products she might buy or what shows she might watch.

“Making up ‘representative’ people became important in the whole advertising enterprise. The phrase ‘the average housewife’ is a description of a type of person that represents all other people within a collective” (Balnavez, O’Regan, Goldsmith 203). The problem with this method is that it doesn’t allow for any differences in personality or preferences, both which are intrinsic to the diverse make up of humankind. “When you talk about an audience of women or 18 to 34-year-olds, everybody knows exactly what you’re talking about. On the other hand, there may be important differences between two
men of the same age, differences that are potentially important” (Webster & Lichty 21). While these old methods of categorization may be effective for making money on advertisement sales, they also influence the type of news coverage that commercial stations put on the air. Beginning in the 1970’s consultants began to give television stations advice about how to bring in the most viewers by spending the least amount of money. Unfortunately, they zeroed in on entertainment, not information. “Acting on the consultants’ advice, local television news directors shortened most stories to one or two minutes at most, and moved coverage away from less visual and more abstract subjects like government and politics to more melodramatic and visually exciting news like crime, calamity and weather” (Downie & Kaiser 181). Since viewers are only exposed to shallow, irrelevant stories, other viewers—including the smarter Sheilas—are being short-sold. There was once a time when fairness, depth and accuracy trumped entertainment, sensationalism and drama, but it was long before I began my career as a TV journalist. Former network television anchor, Dan Rathers, has said that fair and accurate journalism has become scarce since he began his career many decades ago. He blames too much emphasis on profit as the root of the cause. In The News About the News: American Journalism in Peril, Rathers said that when he began his journalism career, “assignments for coverage were made strictly and entirely on the basis of, Do we think this is important enough and/or interesting enough to cover?...Nobody said, Well, it costs too much and we can’t afford that” (Downie & Kaiser 135). He said the content of modern newscasts are designed to draw in audiences first and foremost. The unfortunate reality is that television stations are businesses. They make their money by selling advertising space that fills up the gaps in between stories and weather segments in their
newscast. The TV air waves are saturated with high action, high drama stories that offer very little value to the people who watch them. Instead of enlightening them, informing them, and giving them hope, these stories instill fear, speculation and disgust into the hearts and minds of the community.

Television researchers and corporate consultants would probably reject my claim that Sheila isn’t the only person watching the news. After all, they say years of research statistics have shown that this middle-aged female demographic is one of the most loyal viewers of television. But even if this is true, there is no reason for them to fill newscasts with meaningless, sensationalized stories and trite regurgitations about things the audience already knows. Instead, TV journalists should be more responsible to Sheila by providing her with information and coverage she can learn and benefit from. Broadcasters need to go back to a time in history when the spirit of journalism as a public service was still alive. Their priority should be covering important and newsworthy current events that help shape a smarter, more informed society, not pandering to audiences in order to make money.

The way in which television news stations do business will need a complete restructuring if the content of their newscasts is to become smarter, richer and more informative. While many people have predicted that the Internet will eventually eliminate the need for newspapers, radio and television news, some say these more traditional mediums still have a place in our modern world. “The history of new media is instructive: radio did not eliminate newspapers; talking movies did not destroy radio or newspapers; television did not obliterate radio, newspapers or movies. For nearly a century, Americans have made room for and taken advantage of new technologies without turning
away from old ones (Downie & Kaiser 256). For many people, there is something about turning the black and white pages of a newspaper that cannot be replaced. For others, watching an evening newscast over dinner is part of a nostalgic tradition that no blog, Twitter feed or online magazine can emulate. Still, the future of TV news is uncertain. Much like cassette and VHS tapes, telephone landlines and dial-up Internet, there are some forms of technology that do eventually run their course and disappear. Whether television will become one of those technologies is still yet unknown. But if there is to be a solid future for television news, the profit-seeking station owners and consultants will need to give up the reigns. Perhaps a model much like the one used by non-profit organizations like National Public Radio (NPR) will have to replace the one used by television news today. The success of NPR is based on the dedication and generosity of society members who believe in quality journalism as a tool for self-governing and improving our worth in the world. Some believers still feel that: “American society has benefited greatly from the traditions of great news organizations. They have helped us through great national traumas, taught us unpleasant truths about ourselves, forced us to confront ugly realities that many would have preferred to avoid” (261).

If Sheila is really as smart, as capable and as concerned about her community and world as I think she is, then eventually, she’s going to demand the type of news coverage that lets American citizens use the power of the press to become more informed, self-reflective and forward thinking. “In the end, the most important people shaping tomorrow’s news won’t be the owners or the journalists, but the readers and viewers. As long as they create a market for good journalism, there will be good journalism” (Downie & Kaiser 266). In a perfect future world, television news content will no longer be based
on the tastes and preferences of a weak and unintelligent woman who accepts anything and everything she sees on TV. Instead of being judged by how many viewers and how much money they might be able to bring in, the best news stories will reflect the truth of today, whether that includes controversy, breakthroughs, new developments or tragedy.

The future of television news may not be in the hands of television journalists, high power TV executives, or even the greedy consultants who tell journalists how to sell their stories to the public. Instead, the future may be in the hands of Sheila.
Rating the Audience served as a reference for me as I wrote my Afterword chapter of Writing for Sheila. This book provided an extremely detailed and thorough description of how American media is rated, and furthermore, how television stations and newspapers use those ratings to make a profit. This book was exceptionally helpful because it was published in 2011, and therefore, the information in it was current and up to date. This is important because I was looking for a source that could accurately describe the modern ratings system and not just the historic methods.

Rating the Audience helped me prove my claim that current television ratings systems are not trustworthy. It gave a detailed overview of the different companies that conduct television ratings surveys, as well as the different methods they use for these measurements. “The meter in the home records and stores all broadcast viewing: the time, date, whether the television set is on/off and the channel to which each television set is tuned” (Balnavez, O’Regan, Goldsmith 102). The authors also mentioned how “computer, internet and mobile savvy” (201) most people are today, which helped me prove my claim that it is extremely difficult to track the news content people are digesting based on when their media devices are turned on or off. The book also helped me show evidence of a decrease in audience participation with television ratings surveys. The authors said that modern attitudes about surveys, combined with “too many demands from survey researchers; respondents being too busy to meet the demands; concerns about misrepresentation and privacy” (209) are responsible for this lack of audience
participation. I used this information to help prove my point that without ample audience participation, ratings companies are not getting fair or accurate ratings results. All of this information was crucial in helping me argue that if the consultants are using faulty methods that we can’t rely on, then we also can’t trust their claim that Sheila is an unintelligent housewife.

This book helped me better understand the business side of things when it comes to why news stations and managers are so concerned about how they rank against one another. The authors describe how the prices for commercial advertisements that air on television news are based on how high the newscast ranks. Therefore, news managers are always hoping to get a number one ranking, so much that they may even interpret the results in a way that they can claim they have a higher rank than they really do. “Media proprietors are naturally vitally interested in a ratings convention that presents their best case” (Balnavez, O’Regan, Goldsmith 241).

Finally, Rating the Audience helped me write my argument about the stereotypical formulas used in current audience ratings surveys. The authors talk about how ratings analyzers usually use generic categories such as “women” or “18-34-year-olds to describe all the people who fall under that particular category. “Making up ‘representative’ people became important in the whole advertising enterprise. The phrase ‘the average housewife’ is a description of a type of person that represents all other people within a collective” (Balnavez, O’Regan, Goldsmith 203). The problem with this is that these generalizations don’t allow for personal differences and preferences of individual people. In my Afterword for Writing for Sheila, this helped me prove my main argument, which is that not all Sheilas are the same. Because of her differences in
lifestyle, choices and personality, I argued that television news is not delivering her and the rest of the population with the smart, rich newscast they deserve.


Walter Cronkite’s memoir follows his life from his birth to his first job in a newsroom to the time he spent working as a foreign correspondent during World War II. He details some of the biggest stories he covered during his tenure as a journalist, including the Nuremburg trials, Neil Armstrong’s first steps on the moon and the controversial Vietnam War.

Aside from detailing his journey from small-time newspaper reporter to the “most trusted man in America,” Cronkite also gives his readers an inside look at some of the problems with TV journalism. He often discusses the way things used to be in his beginnings as a broadcaster, in comparison to the way things are now. Cronkite’s story also unveils some of the secrets and deep emotions involved with being a television journalist. He says while many people dismiss the press as being a cold and heartless group of people, Cronkite attempts to fight against this belief when he says of news reporters: “In the midst of a tragedy, our professional drive takes over and dominates our emotions. We move almost like automatons to get the job done. The time for an emotional reaction must wait” (305). He then goes on to explain how TV reporters often have to suppress their emotions, and he tells of how he lost his composure and cried on the air when he announced the death of President John F. Kennedy. “The words stuck in my throat. A sob wanted to replace them” (Cronkite 305).
There are many instances in Cronkite’s memoir where he defends some of the practices of broadcasters and attempts to explain their actions. When he reflects back on a school explosion he once covered in Texas, he talks about the difficulty of being a news reporter and having to ask prying questions that no one else wants to ask, right in the midst of a tragedy or disaster. “It was never a problem that bothered the public until television came along. But now that reporters at the scene of a disaster can be seen asking those questions, the public asks its own questions about what it perceives as journalists’ total insensitivity” (Cronkite 64).

Overall, Cronkite’s book attempts to not only give people a look at the life of a veteran news anchor, but it is also an activist approach to tell the truth about the way in which broadcast news has changed over the years. It asks viewers to question the news they view and search for truth and accuracy among the many news choices they are offered in today’s rapidly growing media. Cronkite also expresses his sympathy for journalists who are working in the modern journalism field. “The infotainment trend has been exacerbated in recent years by the network fight to hang on to a viable share of a shrinking pie…The news departments have moved from the leaders of my years to profit centers, and management now considers ratings more important than prestige” (Cronkite 373).

Walter Cronkite’s autobiography was eye-opening for me. It was a crucial source of information as I worked on my own memoir about the television industry. Given Cronkite’s moniker as the “most trusted man in America,” I was surprised to learn that he too started at the bottom of the reporting ranks, much like I did. He worked in less than ideal environments and for low pay for many years before he worked his way to the top.
What’s important to note about *A Reporter’s Life* is that even as the broadcast news industry has evolved over the years, many of the problems, themes and issues in this career field are the same now as they were in Cronkite’s time, although they have grown significantly. Even in 1996 when Cronkite was writing his memoir, he could predict the downward spiral of television journalism.

This book helped me shape my arguments in *Writing for Sheila*. Because Walter Cronkite was a famous and respected journalist—and I was only a beginning, novice, nobody—my book will obviously read much differently. But aside from that difference, there are many issues Cronkite discusses that I also talk about in *Writing for Sheila*, such as the commodification of news. I will be able to add to this conversation by giving the perspective of a journalist having worked in television in the 21st century, which is beyond the scope of what Cronkite was able to comment on.

I also appreciated Cronkite’s memoir because while he openly criticizes modern journalism for being a money-making business instead of a voice for the people, he also defends it. In his discussion of how television broadcasters aren’t much different than newspaper reporters and other types of journalists, he helped me realize that it was important to include this perspective in my own memoir. While the goal of *Writing for Sheila* is to expose the ideal audience member of TV news, I also need to comment on the fact that I was once an ambitious journalist with a passion for the broadcast news industry.
Leonard Downie Jr. and Robert Kaiser’s book *The News About the News* includes the history of journalism and how it has evolved over the years to what it is today. Much like my memoir, *Writing for Sheila*, this book criticizes the media for its shallowness and scolds journalists for not living up to their fullest potential. While the book scrutinizes all forms of media, it focuses mostly on criticizing television journalism, which the authors believe to be the medium with the most problems today.

This book helped me to validate and expand on many of the arguments I present in *Writing for Sheila*, as well as to form a cohesive argument in the Afterword of my memoir. The authors focus heavily throughout the book on the pressure that television news stations feel to make money, first and foremost. They paint an unfortunate picture of a deteriorating business that has evolved from a cutthroat world of determined, gutsy journalists, to a mediocre profession held by fresh college graduates without any real world reporting experience. This decrease in the quality of journalism means “Americans who depend on local television news get little meaningful information—much less in-depth explanations or exposes—on what is going on in the world around them. Instead, they get a distorted caricature of their communities, a daily drama of crime, accidents, traffic tie-ups, stormy weather and other calamities, leavened by cheerful video of photogenic events like parades, charity walks and county fairs” (Downy & Kaiser 172).

The book’s discussion of this unfortunate truth about the media helped remind me about many issues I faced in journalism where I was forced to do meaningless stories in order to save time and money for my employers. I included these anecdotes in *Writing for*
Sheila, which I believed helped round out my argument regarding television journalism as a whole.

The book also helped me summarize the importance of the media in our world today, which is something that isn’t always easy to do. The authors gave a clear message about how quality journalism “holds communities together in times of crisis, providing the information and images that constitute shared experience. When disaster strikes, the news media give readers and viewers something to hold on to—facts, but also explanation and discussion that can help people deal with the unexpected” (Downey & Kaiser 4). I think this is an important concept that is often forgotten, and I did my best to make sure it was clear in my memoir project as well. When I talked about my experiences during the crisis of September 11, 2001, as well as my coverage of the Brianna Denison murder, I portrayed this community togetherness that took place as a result of the media’s influence.

Finally, in The News About the News, the authors discuss the future of journalism in America at length. Their optimistic point of view was contagious for me, and it helped me to conclude Writing for Sheila on a positive note. They say: “The benefits of good journalism are not hypothetical, but obvious and palpable. News is an important part of the American culture. The United States will be a better place if its citizens can get from the news what they need to know to govern themselves effectively and improve their lives” (Downey & Kaiser 266). I think this is a splendid way to describe the importance of quality journalism, as well as the benefits it can have on members of society. I hope to convey a similar message to my readers in writing for Sheila.

Martin Fletcher’s memoir tells about his dangerous and thrilling thirty-year career as an NBC foreign war correspondent. He starts with tales from his first days working as a writer and a cameraman, all the way until he moves up the chain and becomes the Tel Aviv bureau chief. This book not only gave me an inside look at a facet of journalism that I’m not familiar with, but it also reminded me that modern journalists—despite their shortcomings—do still serve an important purpose in society. In his introduction to the book, Fletcher tells his readers that “This book is not a meditation on society, or a rant about how bad TV journalism has become…It’s something simpler…a series of true-life adventure stories that expose the haunting dilemmas journalists face as we help write that famous first draft of history” (Fletcher 102). Before I read this book, I couldn’t figure out how to summarize the important role that journalists play in the world. While I wanted to expose television media for misrepresenting its audience, I also wanted to show some of the positive elements of broadcasting. When I read Fletcher’s line that said “my job is to help people care about other people,” (102) I knew his book was going to be incredibly helpful as I researched and organized my thoughts for my own memoir.

Fletcher’s memoir helped me see what *Writing for Sheila* was previously missing. As he travels from place to place, watching some of his coworkers and competitors die in the fields from bombs and explosions, Fletcher recalls the moral dilemmas that war correspondents often face. “Is it reasonable to film a crying woman two feet from the lens? How about a lost child screaming for its parent? Should one film him or take him
by the hand? If a man is to be executed and the soundman’s gear suddenly doesn’t work, what do you do? Delay the execution?” (Fletcher 726). He sheds light on a very touchy subject here. Journalists are often faced with the tough choice between beating out the competition by capturing tragedies on camera and in print, and helping their story subjects out of the goodness of their own heart. Their job is to report the news, not get involved, but sometimes the lines are blurred. While I have never reported from a dangerous war zone like Fletcher has, I felt like I could still relate to these internal struggles. I often remember urging my photographers to zoom the camera lens in on tears or blood in order to tell a more tragic and sad story. Fletcher says “After three decades covering war and suffering in every dark corner of the globe, anyone’s brain would be fried” (93). His discussion of the immunity that news reporter’s gain after being exposed to so much tragedy was very familiar to me, and after reading Breaking News, I decided to include more moments where I faced moral dilemmas in Writing for Sheila as well.

Fletcher’s positive attitude when faced with scary, life-threatening situations is admirable. Many of the circumstances that I wrote about in Writing for Sheila seemed trivial after reading Breaking News, but they also reconfirmed the uniqueness of my own memoir. For instance, in Writing for Sheila, I complained about the low pay and high stress of being a local TV news reporter with the responsibility of writing, editing, shooting and reporting my own stories. In Fletcher’s book, he praises this responsibility: “The solitary nature of the one-man band appealed to me. I loved being an agency cameraman, working alone, in charge of my own time and beholden to nobody” (1374). In Writing for Sheila, I also wrote about how frustrating it was to have to work long hours, on holidays, and for little compensation. In Breaking News, Fletcher talks about
watching his friends die in a minefield in Turkey, and how he barely escaped death himself. “Journalists always discount the danger and assume if something bad happens, it will happen to someone else” (Fletcher 865). The differences between my memoir and _Breaking News_ are vast, but reading this book helped reassure me that there is indeed a market for nonfiction books about journalists. Furthermore, it gave me the confidence to see that _Writing for Sheila_ fits into a niche that hasn’t yet been filled.


I chose to include Susan Jane Gilman’s travel memoir, _Undress Me in the Temple of Heaven_, in my bibliography because her storytelling techniques are one of a kind. This book is like no other memoir I’ve read, in that it reads like a story from beginning to end. It feels like a made-up novel, although it is a work of nonfiction. Because of this, I was enthralled the entire time I was reading it, and I learned a lot about ways I could improve my own memoir.

The book is about Gilman and her friend Claire’s 1986 journey, which was supposed to be a backpacking trip around the world for one year. But their adventure turned out to be a heartbreaking catastrophe that resulted in the loss of a friendship forever. The women started their trip in the People’s Republic of China—with intentions of circling the globe from there—but they never made it beyond that country because Claire’s previously hidden mental illness began to take a turn for the worse.

From the very beginning of this memoir, Gilman’s exceptional descriptive writing techniques help carry the story along. The first sentence in the book always struck me as
the perfect way to begin a book: “No one else seemed concerned when our plane took a
nosedive. We banked sharply to the left, then plunged toward what looked like a tongue
depressor, a tiny spit of land jutting into a titanium sea” (Gilman 1). It’s such a visual
sentence, and it begs the reader to keep reading. Throughout the book, Gilman describes
each place she travels to with perfection. “I have a memory of stopping somewhere
along the way, of Claire, Jonnie, and me standing on a ridge in the golden late-afternoon
sun overlooking a valley stiched with fields, of seeing a pool of platinum water shining
on a plateau in the distance…I remember rippling foothills giving away to mountains on
the horizon, mountains as final and declarative as punctuation. And I remember that a
rainbow appeared, transforming the whole vista into a postcard” (Gilman 127). Her
careful, lovely writing in this book was something I tried hard to emulate in Writing for
Sheila. When I described my first look at Rapid City, South Dakota and my adventures in
Northern Japan, I stopped and tried to find a way to “show” the readers what I was
seeing, and not just “tell” them. I think this is what Gilman does in this book so well, and
it’s very admirable.

Another quality in Gilman’s book that I tried to emulate in Writing for Sheila is
the self-reflective paragraphs that she uses in order to carry the reader along through her
spiritual and educational journey. “I reel from my own foolishness. How could I have
been so naive? How could I have been so oblivious? Claire’s unraveling, her hurtling
toward suicide, the machinations of the Chinese authorities—have I absorbed absolutely
nothing? For seven weeks I’ve been tromping around Asia, candy-coated in deflective
stupidity” (242). These questions she poses to herself allow the reader inside Gilman’s
head where they have access to her inner thoughts and emotions. I think this is a very
effective technique, so I took a similar approach in Writing for Sheila. When I made mistakes, I talked about those mistakes in my memoir and allowed my reader in on how I was feeling and reacting. I think this type of writing is essential in order to create a bond with the reader so they care to keep reading.


This department store book by Freeman Hall was an entertaining, hilarious and fast-paced book that inspired me to make several necessary changes to Writing for Sheila. The memoir is about a flamboyant gay man who moves to California to become a screenwriter, but ends up starting a long-term career working at a fancy department store as a handbag salesman. First of all, unbeknownst to me, Freeman Hall is a Reno native, so I immediately felt a connection to him. It always gives me hope to read books by regular people from places like Reno because it makes being published feel like an attainable goal.

Before I even started the book, I read Freeman’s Author’s Note and found the solution to a question that has been plaguing me since I began working on Writing for Sheila. Freeman says the people and events in his book “are based on my twentyplus years of retail experience. However, the names of stores and people have been changed, timelines are out of sync, and the situations have been cleverly disguised, ripped inside out, and run over several times” (43). I have often wondered how I would protect myself if I were to attempt to submit Writing for Sheila for publishing. (And I fully plan to!) Because television stations are corporations with lawyers, and because my story is full of damaging anecdotes about people in that line of business, I know that if I were to submit
it in its current form, my book would be a major liability. That being said, if I were to change the specific details about people and places, I would hope to be protected from lawsuits. I think my memoir is appropriate for a thesis project in its current form, but when I have revised my manuscript enough that I feel comfortable sending it out to publishers, I will need to think about ways in which I can tell my story without naming names.

Much of Hall’s book focuses on the negative aspects of selling handbags, which often includes funny stories about obnoxious customers. “And like the cherry on top of a shit sundae, a new customer forces her way up to the counter and shouts in my face: ‘Excuse me, do you work here?’” (Hall 101). He continuously berates customers who make his days on the job seem hellish. This element of the got me thinking about Writing for Sheila and a section I wrote previously and then decided not to include. As a TV reporter, I often dealt with annoying people when I was out in the community working on stories. I had a few paragraphs in my opening chapter dedicated to venting about the absurd behavior of people confronted with a television camera, much of which might have been offensive to my readers. I chose not to include this section because I thought it might turn some people off. Reading Retail Hell helped confirm that I made the right decision. While Hall’s complaints about customers were funny, I decided that wasn’t the tone I wanted to set in my own memoir.

While Retail Hell is mostly about what it’s like to work as a salesperson in a fancy department store, Freeman Hall also discusses his dream of becoming a screenplay writer. He often daydreams about himself accepting an Oscar while he’s working at the department store, and he imagines what it would be like to leave retail and succeed in the
movie business. Although he says he would prefer to make a living as a writer, he still manages to be a successful salesperson as well. Hall even receives an award for being most popular among his customers. These elements of *Retail Hell* stood out to me because they reminded me that I needed to include some discussion in *Writing for Sheila* about my personal goals outside of journalism. While I was succeeding as a television reporter, my dream to become a children’s author was always in the back of my mind. I think this says a lot about why I made the choice to quit my job and go back to graduate school. I knew I needed to include a section in my memoir about these goals in order for my book to feel complete.

While I enjoyed the book *Retail Hell*, I didn’t feel that it had a very clear ending, which was beneficial in helping me make sure I didn’t make the same mistake with *Writing for Sheila*. I think Hall’s goal was to entertain his readers and tell the not-so-glamorous side of working in retail, but there wasn’t really a larger moral message in his book like I imagined there would be. This omission helped me realize that my memoir—while also funny at times—is in a different genre than *Retail Hell* all together. I want my memoir not just to entertain people, but also to teach them about problems with the media today.


Laurie Hertzel’s memoir, titled *News To Me: Adventures of an Accidental Journalist*, chronicles the two decades she spent working at and reporting for the *Duluth News-Tribune*. In that time, she worked in positions such as an assistant, a librarian, a
general assignment reporter and a columnist. Her book is not just about her career and personal growth, but also about the changes that took place over the years in the newspaper industry.

When I first began reading Hertzel’s book, I was afraid that she’d already written the memoir I was hoping to write. Because *Writing for Sheila* is also about my life and how I dealt the changes taking place in journalism, I feared that perhaps my story had already been told. But as I continued to read, it became clear that Hertzel’s book is very different than what I am trying to accomplish with *Writing for Sheila*. That being said, I enjoyed her story very much and it helped me to identify some elements of my memoir that were missing. It also brought up some themes that I found interesting, but do not plan to include in my thesis project.

First off, some of the major themes that Hertzel addresses in her book are only briefly mentioned in my memoir. The entrance of women in the news industry was still fairly new in the 1980’s. Hertzel discusses gender differences in the newsroom, as well as the struggle that female news writers and photographers had to battle with in order to make it in a male-dominated industry. Hertzel also talks about the evolution of news coverage involving women. She says the changes included demands from the editors that women would no longer be “referred to as girls or grandmothers or coeds. Their physical appearance would no longer be a part of the story, unless it was somehow relevant—no more pretty, petite, spry, or blonde. Job titles would become neutral—no more spokesman or spokeswoman, no more councilman or councilwoman” (Hertzel 31). While I do discuss some of these gender themes briefly in my thesis, they are not at the core of my argument.
Hertzel’s memoir includes tales of her own personal growth as a reporter and as a woman. Hertzel talks about the stories she liked to write for the newspaper, and why they were important to her, saying her goal was “to illustrate for readers the many different ways of living, to show them how many different kinds of people and lives there were, right there in northern Minnesota” (Hertzel 102). I think these types of self-reflections are really well done in her book, and they add perspective and context to the story. I also think these types of reflections were missing from *Writing for Sheila*, and so after reading *News to Me*, I decided to go back and add more discussion in my piece about the types of stories I enjoyed writing. Because *Writing for Sheila* focuses more on the television viewer rather than the television reporter, I think it’s important for me to talk about why I wanted to do smart stories instead of depthless ones.

*News to Me* also brought to my attention an element of the journalism industry that I had overlooked completely. Part of what bothered me about my former job as a reporter was the fact that television journalists don’t have the time or the resources to do quality, in-depth news stories. Today’s news industry is all about getting the most work out of reporters for the least amount of money. This is why television reporters today are often seen shooting their own video, recording their own stand-up shots, and editing together their own packages. It’s cheaper for one person to do the job of three people. In *News to Me*, Hertzel says “Our newsroom was much smaller than those at big-city dailies, and resources—and aspirations—were modest by comparison. Big Sunday stories were reported and written in two days; there was no time left to think, let alone think big” (159). I found it very interesting that Hertzel was dealing with this same dilemma as a newspaper reporter in the 80’s and 90’s. Most television reporters believe that newspaper
reporters have it good because they get more space to fill than we do. Apparently though, newspaper reporters also feel they are limited in this capacity as well. After reading this section of *News to Me*, I decided to add some discussion about the lack of time and space in the broadcasting business to my thesis project as well.

Overall, Hertzel’s book was very beneficial for me as I worked on *Writing for Sheila*. While the author and I are ages apart—and we worked as journalists in different decades—it was still fascinating to see how much we had in common as journalists and professionals. I felt myself relating to her over and over again as I read her book, and I had dozens of moments where I felt sympathetic to the struggles she faced along her journey. This is the same reaction I hope to get from other journalists as they read my memoir.


I heard about this book in a recent interview on NPR and I knew right away that it would be an excellent addition to my annotated bibliography. The confessional memoir is written by Ryan Holiday, a self-proclaimed “media manipulator,” who writes about how he uses Internet blogs in order to control mainstream news content. Throughout the book, he describes how he manufactured fake stories and controversies in order to gain publicity for his clients. Holiday writes about the many different methods he uses in order to get the news media to pay attention to a story. He talks about how often times, what is
nothing more than a publicity stunt becomes real-life genuine news. The book left me feeling not only remorseful due to my former role in the media, but also ashamed at how gullible the American public can be.

What I liked most about this book is that it read like an exposé of the mass media, which is similar to the goal I have for *Writing for Sheila*. I want people to read my memoir and learn something about how they are being exploited by modern journalists. Holiday’s book is an excellent model for how to do this effectively. He writes candidly about how he and other media manipulators feed enticing and profitable information to the media so journalists will do stories and create publicity around that information. He talks about how journalists often look to social media or blogs for story ideas and information, and therefore, media manipulators like him use those blogs in order to create buzz around sometimes completely fabricated stories. For instance, Holiday describes how when he was tasked with promoting the film *I Hope They Serve Beer In Hell*, he organized a fake controversy around the movie. He says he planned college campus protests and vandalized movie billboards in order to make it seem like there was outrage around the crass film. While none of the outrage was real, major newspapers like *The Washington Post* and *The Chicago Tribune* did stories on it. The news coverage surrounding the book was so influential that the book landed on the *New York Times* bestseller list. Holiday says he media manipulation tactics show “a part of the media system that is hidden from your view: how the news is created
and driven by marketers, and that no one does anything to stop it” (143). This idea that journalists are only interested in covering controversy and calamity that will drive up ratings is a major theme in *Writing for Sheila* and this book helped provide more fuel for that argument.

*Trust Me I’m Lying* confirmed my claims that journalists are failing their readers and viewers by focusing more on making a profit than informing the public. By using information found on blogs and social media to come up with story ideas, journalists are capitalizing on situations that are *already abuzz* in the online community, meaning the stories done on these situations are guaranteed to create high traffic on-air and online. Holiday says in a recent study, “89 percent of journalists reported using blogs for their research for stories. Roughly half reported using Twitter to find and research stories, and more than two thirds use other social networks, such as Facebook or LinkedIn, in the same way” (377). These numbers are disturbing and helped me confirm the de-professionalization of mainstream media that I discuss at length in *Writing for Sheila*.

Holiday’s book not only confirmed many of my points about the media, but it also brought up new ideas that I hadn’t thought about yet. It helped me see modern journalism in an even less flattering light than I already did. In chapter four, Holiday compares modern journalism with the sensationalized yellow journalism of the late 1800’s. He shows a list of headlines from the past few years and compares it with a list from the days of the yellow press. Current headlines
such as “How Justin Beiber Caught a Contagious Syphilis Rumor” are held up against historic headlines like “An Orgy of Gray-Haired Men, Callow Youths, Gamblers, Roughs and Painted Women…Fight at Intervals” (1358-1359). Holiday is attempting to show how today’s television viewers and newspaper readers are enticed by the same content they were a century ago, “Only today the headlines aren’t being yelled on busy street corners but on noisy news aggregators and social networks” (1359).

*Trust Me, I’m Lying* was extremely helpful in my establishment of tone for *Writing for Sheila*. In Holiday’s book, he writes with a remorseless voice, telling readers how his “job is to lie to the media so they can lie to you. I cheat, bribe, and connive for bestselling authors and billion-dollar brands and abuse my understanding of the Internet to do it” (125). He writes in the second person and directly addresses the readers of his book, which has a jarring effect on the audience. In *Writing for Sheila*, I chose to take a different approach. While much of my memoir includes confessions of moments in my journalism career that I am not proud of, I also followed those moments with confessions about my feelings of regret. I intended to show the reader that I do understand the mistakes I made as a journalist and that I hope the future of journalism will be better. Holiday doesn’t seem concerned with how his book will influence people’s opinion of him at all, and he doesn’t ask his readers to change their habits because of what he reveals about his profession. “I’ve helped pioneer a media system designed to trick,
cajole, and steal every second of the most precious resource in the world—people’s time. I’m going to show you every single one of these tricks, and what they mean. What you choose to do with this information is up to you” (Holiday 241). While Holiday’s approach was unique and quite effective for his project, his book helped me realize that I needed to create a more likeable, approachable tone of voice for *Writing for Sheila*. For me, tone was important if I was going to be able to influence my readers to begin questioning the mass media.


I chose to include *Liar’s Club* in my annotated bibliography because in my opinion, it’s one of the most well-written memoirs on bookshelves today. The memoir tells the life story of Mary Karr as she grew up in an unpleasant town in Texas, and then later, Colorado. She describes how her parents met, their volatile relationship, and her rocky upbringing that stemmed from her mother’s mental instability and alcoholism. The book is heartbreaking, humorous and engaging all at the same time, which is why it was so successful. Mary Karr’s story does not fall under the category of a memoir about a “bad job,” but much can be learned from her writing style and form, her pacing, her descriptions and details, and her personal voice.

One major thing I took away from reading *The Liar’s Club* is the importance of details. Mary Karr’s childhood reads like a movie scene in some ways, because she includes the tiny mundane details that somehow make all the difference. When she describes an afternoon at a meeting of the Liars’ Club, she mentions the rims of the beer
glasses, and when she remembers a moment of reunification with her father, she
describes the smell and look of oil, both of which help give the story an authentic feel to
it without being preachy. “He was dirty and smelled like crude oil when he hugged Lucia
and me, one under each arm. Our principal didn’t pause, though, before shaking his hand,
didn’t even did out his hankie to wipe the oil off his palm after he shook. He was partial
to white starched shirts, but knew when to set that aside” (Karr 99). Reading The Liars’
Club helped me realize that the little details in a story are what make it honest and
believable. In my revision of Writing for Sheila, I chose to include small details about
memories I have from my television journalism days in order to make my memoir feel
more authentic. These details are in the form of descriptions, dialogue, and anecdotes
about my memories.

Another technique that Karr uses is the ability to tell a truthful, honest story about
things that happened a very long time ago, which she might not remember exactly. She
uses letters and conversations with people in her life to help her recall situations that she
doesn’t have a clear memory of. When she does have an exact memory of something, she
uses cues in her writing to make it clear to the reader that she is telling an anecdote about
something she is sure of. When telling a story about her father’s group of gambling,
drinking buddies—dubbed the Liars’ Club—she emphasizes how clear her memory is.
“My father comes into focus for me on a Liars’ Club afternoon. He sits at a wobbly card
table weighed down by a bottle. Even now the scene seems so real to me that I can’t help
but write it in the present tense” (Karr 15). In Writing for Sheila I was able to use old
video archives, scripts and online news content in order to help me recall man of the
stories and situations I was faced with during my tenure as a journalist. In order to
describe my coverage of the James Biela murder trial with accuracy, I referred to my Cover it Live blog. I think my memoir is much better than it would have been without these tools of reference. Mary Karr’s *The Liars’ Club* brought the importance of these research tools to my attention.


*Telling True Stories* was an assigned reading project for English 730: “The Craft of Writing.” It’s a compilation of writing tips from famous journalists, novelists, and screenwriters, and it is by far one of the most useful tools I used while working on completing *Writing for Sheila*. The book is strictly meant to assist people who are working on nonfiction projects, so it is helpful in teaching a novice how to successfully tell “true” stories using a variety of techniques and methods. I consulted this book hundreds of times as I formulated my own memoir.

Something I took away from this book early on is that I needed to keep *Writing for Sheila* extremely focused if it was going to be successful. While I sometimes got caught up telling long, rambling back-stories and going off on tangents, *Telling True Stories* helped reel me back in. According to Jon Franklin, who contributed an essay on characters to *Telling True Stories*, it’s important to stick to just one topic, and not give the reader details about every element of a person. “I am a writer, teacher, gardener, father, dog owner, and husband. A story about me couldn’t possibly include all those elements” (Franklin 127). In *Writing for Sheila*, I cut out any details that didn’t directly have to do
with my life as a television journalist. During the years I wrote about within my memoir, there were many relationships, friendships, travels, and more, but I did not choose to include all of them in Writing for Sheila because they weren’t important. I only included major events and people, such as my marriage to Schuyler, and the birth of my son, which are important in telling a story about who I have become. I think by omitting the less important details of my life, I ended up with a much more concise and focused narrative in the long run.

Telling True Stories also helped teach me that to keep readers interested, I needed to use rising action in my writing. According to Tom French, who contributed an article about sequencing in writing, “The fundamental purpose of a narrative’s first paragraph is to make the reader continue to the second paragraph. And the purpose of that paragraph is to make him read the third paragraph” (143). I did this by ending my chapters and subsections with little pieces of information about what was to come—just enough information that the reader would want to continue—but not so much that I gave away all the details and they didn’t need to read any further. I also followed the advice of Sonia Nazario, a journalist who contributed an article in Telling True Stories about condensing large projects into smaller ones. She says when she wrote the piece Enrique’s Journey, she gathered too much information and she had to cut a lot out of her writing when she put it together. “I deleted the beginning or end of several chapters, although that meant leaving out major parts of the story’s chronology. I learned that it’s okay to skip ahead, to go from A to C and skip B” (Nazario, 210). This was extremely helpful to me in being able to write a chronological story about nearly a decade of my life without including every single moment. For instance, when I transitioned from the time I was in basic
training to when I moved to Japan, I simply began a new chapter. It wasn’t important to include my flight to Japan, my first days on the job, and other less important details. Instead, I just skipped ahead to a more visual moment where I had begun to get to know Sheila as my targeted audience.

One additional tip I took away from Telling True Stories was not to just rely on my memories as I was working on Writing for Sheila. Much of what happened in my memoir took place over a span of thirty years. There were some things I remembered very vividly, and other things that were a little cloudy. In a chapter about reconstructing scenes, Adam Hochschild says “If your writing includes a lot of vivid detail and the book reads like a novel, readers may assume that you’re inventing things. It’s important to show that you aren’t” (135). I made sure my writing was authentic by using my own written work, conversations with people, and the Internet as a source. I watched many old news segments and read many old scripts to remember the details about news stories I did several years back. I also talked to my mom quite a bit in order to recount childhood memories and confirm small details. I also logged on to the Cover it Live web blog that I wrote for the James Biela murder trial in order to get word-for-word quotations from the courtroom, as well as day to day blog entries and comments. Without referencing these chapters, I may have had to leave out important details if I feared I was going to inaccurately describe a memory, a piece of dialogue or an anecdote. Telling True Stories helped me come up with a much more real and authentic memoir over all.


Anne Lamott’s Bird by Bird is one of my favorite writing craft books on the
market. I assign chapters of it to my students because I think it’s extremely helpful in giving writers the confidence and motivation they need to complete a writing project. I reread it when I began working on *Writing for Sheila* because my memoir was not only lacking direction, but I was also feeling flustered and self-conscious about my writing as a whole. This book helps teach writers how to set aside their fears about writing and get started, even when the project feels way out of reach or impossible. Lamott also gives specific tips on how to get into a writer’s frame of mind as well as how to get past debilitating writer’s block. I believe it is one of the most humble, down to earth writing guides that exists.

Lamott’s chapter on “Shitty First Drafts” helped me tremendously. Often times when I would sit down to start working on a chapter, I would only be able to write a couple of sentences before I would delete it and start over. I was being too judgmental of myself and way too much of a perfectionist. Lamott says that even good writers have to start with a bad draft before they can revise it and come up with something much better. “Almost all good writing begins with terrible first efforts. You need to start somewhere. Start by getting something—anything—down on paper” (Lamott 25). She says the second and third drafts are used to “say what you have to say more accurately” (25) and check every little detail to make sure the writing is clean and polished.

Anne Lamott crushes many stereotypes in *Bird by Bird* about what it takes to be a successful writer. Aside from talking about how it takes many rejections in order to become recognized and published, she also discusses the misconception that writing is a linear process. “My students assume that when well-respected writers sit down to write their books, they know pretty much what is going to happen because they’ve outlined
most of the plot, and this is why their books turn out so beautifully…Well, I do not know anyone fitting this description at all. Everyone I know flails around, kvetching and growing despondent, on the way to finding a plot and structure that work” (Lamott 85). My writing process felt very disorganized throughout Writing for Sheila because I often didn’t know exactly what I was going to write about until I started typing. I sometimes wondered if I should have outlined my piece better or creating a framework before I began, but after reading Bird by Bird, I realized that writing is a messy process and your final product may not always be what you expected it to be. Writing for Sheila did turn out differently than I envisioned it would, but Anne Lamott showed me that that is okay.

Lamott’s chapter on “Moral Point of View” was incredibly helpful to me as I tightened my focus of Writing for Sheila. When I started, there were so many aspects of my journalism career that I wanted to write about. I was having a difficult time zeroing in on a clear topic. I also kept second guessing things I wrote because I began to worry about how these topics might be received by different readers. I felt uncomfortable writing about personal things that happened in my past, and I was concerned about what others would think when they read these stories. Anne Lamott’s words “good writing is about telling the truth” (3) got me to stop and think about each word I was putting into my memoir. Sometimes—without even realizing I was doing it—I was bending the truth or sugarcoating facts in order to make the truth seem less harsh. When I started focusing on telling the truth, it was extremely liberating. Everything I wrote felt after that point felt therapeutic and freeing. Lamott says to choose a moral position, or “a passionate caring inside you” (108) and write about it. After reading her chapter, I realized that my moral position on broadcast news and how it hurts Sheila was an important topic that could only
be properly covered if I were daring enough to tell the absolute truth.


*News Junkie* is an extremely personal and graphic memoir written by investigative journalist Jason Leopold. Much of the memoir focuses on experiences he had in his former job as the Los Angeles bureau chief for the Dow Jones newswires, but he also reveals his dark past as a thief and a drug addict. While struggling with his addictions, he was still able to somewhat obscure his criminal past while breaking huge national news stories. The book chronicles Leopold’s journey from a drug dealer to an aggressive and passionate journalist.

I learned a lot about honesty from reading *News Junkie*. It’s hard not to feel some disdain toward Leopold while reading his book because he admits to purposely hurting and lying to people in order to score big breaking news stories. Leopold must have known he was not going to win any fans by publishing this book, but it didn’t stop him from writing it. An example of this honesty comes in an early scene in the memoir when Leopold is tipped off about a story when a friend of his confides in him. Leopold decides to run with the article even though his friend who trusted him gave Leopold information “off the record.” Leopold comments, “‘Sometimes the public good outweighs everything else. Maviglio never should have told me this off the record.’ I was lying. I didn’t give two shits about the public good. At least not then. I simply sensed a big splash and wanted to boost my career and my ego” (149). I found this passage courageous because it says what many journalists have undoubtedly thought about but never dared to say out loud. In fact, *News Junkie* is filled with many confessions of a similar nature.
In one section, Leopold reveals how he and other journalists often have to make difficult choices and “cross ethical boundaries” (62) in order to get stories. “Reporters routinely cut corners for a juicy story. I’m not looking for a way to excuse my behavior. I’m just saying that it happens more often than you might think. All journalists have their own set of personal rules, and some actually take them seriously. They’re the ones who slam on the brakes when a traffic signal changes from green to yellow. Others like me speed up and race through the intersection before the light turns red” (Leopold 62).

Again, Leopold’s honesty about the ugly side of news reporting is admirable here. In *Writing for Sheila*, I attempted to write as candidly as Leopold did when referring to my motivations for finding and reporting stories, even when I knew it would not cast a very positive light on broadcasters. I think it’s important to reveal everything about yourself if you want readers to connect with you. This type of honest writing is extremely effective because it shows the reader that the author isn’t hiding anything. While there are portions of *News Junkie* where it’s easy to hate Leopold because he seems so heartless, there are other sections where he becomes very human. When he discusses the moments of his marriage where he and his wife were having problems because of his addiction and mental breakdown, Leopold shows a true sense of remorse for what he did. “I was killing her. I was killing myself. There will never be enough apologies or flowers or diamonds in my life to express how truly sad and sorry I am for what I did to Lisa emotionally that dark, dark year” (Leopold 962).

Aside from Leopold’s confessions about the less than admirable qualities of journalists, he also gives some insider information about the news profession that makes the whole memoir more fascinating and readable. He talks about how when he and other
journalists would get together at press conferences, “everyone knew who was who. Overweight, khaki-wearing print journalists with thin notebooks stuffed into back pockets are easily distinguished from television reporters who wear designer clothing and smell good” (Leopold 192). Leopold shows a genuine love affair with the news when he describes a typical newsroom: “Reporters and editors balanced their telephone receivers between their shoulders and ears and violently tapped their computer keyboards—clickety clickety clack—and the phones kept ringing—ding-a-ling, ding-a-ling, ding-a-ling. It sounded like a symphony and it gave me goosebumps” (1186). These passages reminded me that I needed to add a section to Writing for Sheila about the remarkable camaraderie that broadcast journalists have, even though they are competitors. I think I needed to show that being a journalist allows people to become part of an exclusive “club” that can’t be explained to outsiders. I ended up including a chapter about my difficult decision to quit broadcast news and how my relationships with other journalists weighed into that decision. I think this made my memoir feel much more complete in the long run.

In News Junkie, Leopold ends up leaving the mainstream media and moving to Australia to write for an independent news blog. When he makes the decision to change career, he talks about the “indie and mainstream media and the longstanding war between them” (Leopold 2524). Leopold says because independent media websites do not rely on selling advertisements in order to operate, they “are largely composed of hardcore journalists who care about the substance of their stories” (2528). I think Leopold is sending a larger message here about the future of journalism, and as I wrote my last chapters of Writing for Sheila, I kept thinking about his words. His final chapter helped
me figure out what it was I wanted to say in my Afterword, and his final paragraphs helped create a model for ways I could close Writing for Sheila.


Shut Up, I’m Talking is a memoir written by a former law student and Canadian New Yorker, Gregory Levy, who sets out to join the Israeli army, and eventually ends up living in Tel Aviv, writing speeches for Prime ministers Ariel Sharon and Ehud Olmert. The book is not only hilarious and eye-opening, but it’s also informative, sentimental, and likeably unpretentious. It served as an excellent example of how to take a big chunk of time and condense it into an entertaining and informative memoir.

One trait about Shut Up, I’m Talking that I chose to emulate is its extreme accessibility. I wanted Writing for Sheila to be something that people read not just to learn more about television journalism and its faults, but also something they could immerse themselves in and actually enjoy. Levey does this wonderfully. Levey writes simple, easy to understand prose with very little room for showy descriptions or big, boastful words. He writes so simplistically that some might argue he’s too simple, although I would disagree. I believe there is something to be said for a writer who gets right to the point.

Levey also uses very effective strategies for summing up several years of his life in just a little over 250 pages. When the story starts, Levey is in law school, but since the book is supposed to be about his experience as a speechwriter, he doesn’t spend a lot of time on details that don’t directly align to those experiences. For instance, we hear very little about Levey’s love life in the beginning of the story. Even when he meets his now-
wife, Abby, he breezes over their relationship in only a few paragraphs. While Levey
does give some background information on his upbringing, he doesn’t talk much about
his family either. Instead, he stays focused throughout his piece, discussing only what his
cover jacket promises the book will be about: diplomacy lessons he learned while
working for the Israeli government. I think Levey’s decision to narrow his focus was the
right one. Although he has a fairly long period of time to cover in his book, he does a
great job of keeping the story in motion. His story is written mostly in chronological
order, with some retrospective sections where he steps back in time. He doesn’t include
every passing moment of the time he spent working as a speechwriter. Instead, he
separates his chapters into untitled subsections to help the reader understand that there is
a scene break. To ensure the reader understands, Levey uses word and phrase cues, such
as “meanwhile,” (178) “a week passed,” (182) “eventually” (76) and “on another
excruciatingly slow August day.” (106) These cues are sometimes used to help the reader
understand that time has passed. Others are used as a way to jump to a new scene without
having to explain all the mundane details that happened in between. I thought these
techniques were extremely effective, which is why I chose to mimic them in Writing for
Sheila. I was able to skip large portions of my life that are uninteresting, in order to make
room for the more important, relevant moments.

Shut Up, I’m Talking ended up convincing me to rethink the direction of my own
memoir, Writing for Sheila. I read it when I was still working on the beginning chapters
of my memoir, and there were times I felt very lost and unmotivated. Levey’s book
helped me snap out of that destructive mind frame. I think that Levey does an excellent
job of writing about a complicated and important subject, but without boring his readers
or taking himself too seriously. He takes his readers along on a journey with him and allows them to feel like insiders while he explains the absurd, hilarious and sometimes heartbreaking aspects of his former job. Before I read this book, I was headed in what felt like the wrong direction. I was even starting to question my original motivations for writing the piece. But reading this book energized me and helped me see how successful my memoir can be if I stay on target: a thorough, unpretentious look inside a rare career field. Levey’s book isn’t pretending to be something it’s not. Instead, it’s an honest portrayal of a man who took a wrong turn career-wise, and then found his way back home.


I included Susan Orlean’s collection of stories about real people on my bibliography list because it inspired a last minute chapter addition to *Writing for Sheila* that I hadn’t yet thought to include. In her book, Orlean interviews and writes stories about children, athletes, rappers, designers, and everyday people from all walks of life. She says as a writer and a journalist, she has always been drawn to these types of people. “I just wanted to write what are usually called “features”—a term that I hate because it sounds so fluffy and lightweight, like pillow stuffing, but that is used to describe stories that move at their own pace, rather than the news stories that race to keep time with events. The subjects I was drawn to were often completely ordinary, but I was confident that I could find something extraordinary in their ordinariness” (Orlean xiii). When I read this book, I completely related to Orlean’s magnetism toward “feature” stories. I realized
that I too used to enjoy doing stories about everyday people, and that is why I decided to include a chapter about the stories I was drawn to in my memoir. I ended up adding a chapter that came just before the James Biela murder trial started, which told my version of why I also liked stories about everyday, normal people, instead of high-action, high-drama stories about crimes and disasters. Without this addition, my memoir would have felt incomplete.


Ruth Reichl’s third book recaps the time she spent working as a food critic for the *New York Times*. By the time she wrote it, she had already become a very successful and well-known critic at the *Los Angeles Times*. Intermixed with published food reviews as well as some of her own recipes, Ruth gives readers an inside view of what it’s like to be a food critic. In order to review many of the restaurants in her book, she dresses up in unrecognizable disguises so the restaurant staff won’t pander for positive reviews. Her book ends up displaying an important message: That people’s treatment at some of New York’s finest restaurants often depends on their outer appearance.

I chose to include this book in my annotated bibliography because although Ruth Reichl is not a news reporter, she does work at a newspaper, and I felt her book could be helpful as I established a format for my own memoir. *Garlic and Sapphires* is also in the genre of memoirs about “bad jobs,” which my memoir also falls under. She does for her readers what I would like my memoir to do: give a new perspective on a seemingly glamorous job. While Reichl’s book doesn’t criticize the food critic business as much as I
criticize the news business in *Writing for Sheila*, her book does shed light on the less-than-ideal circumstances of her position as a food critic.

This book was helpful to me because although it covered a span of several years, Reichl did a good job of condensing her stories into a shorter format, while still giving the reader a sense of her personal and professional growth. It almost read like a collection of short stories, but it still had a defined beginning, middle and ending, which helped me want to continue to read it. It was helpful for my own memoir project because it gave me ideas of ways to break up the writing. For example, Reichl’s chapters are organized by either the food she is reviewing or the name of the disguise she is wearing when she enters a particular restaurant. She doesn’t try to do too much with one chapter either. Instead of telling each and every minor detail, she often writes a large paragraph that includes one anecdote about her experience in the restaurant, and then signifies a scene jump to her next anecdote. If she hadn’t done this, I imagine her book could have ended up spanning thousands of pages, and it probably would have been pretty boring.

Reichl is also excellent with descriptions. Obviously as a food critic, she has had plenty of experience describing food, and she does it well: “Biting in you expected ocean brine and got something altogether different, something rich and deep and mysterious. The fish, poached in goose fat, had absorbed the taste of the bird. It was a sensation both dizzying and exciting, as if you were flying and swimming at the same time” (Reichl 310).

Aside from food, Reichl also does an excellent job of colorfully setting up scenes as she transitions between her chapters. In the end of her novel, this scene helps the reader prepare for the climax of her book: “It always gets cold in New York just before
Thanksgiving, a mean, icy bitterness that serves as a terrible warning of the frozen months ahead. A wind comes sweeping through the city and the leaves, which have been clinging tenaciously to the trees, fall off in a single day, leaving nothing but bare shivering limbs in its wake” (Reichl 319). Reichl doesn’t just say things are the way they are, she shows it. After reading her book, I went through the chapters of Writing for Sheila, and rewrote several scenes and descriptions—including metaphors and similes—in order to make it more colorful, exciting and readable.

Garlic and Sapphires was an excellent addition to my reading list as I worked on Writing for Sheila. Reichl, although very famous, comes across as humble and down to earth in her book, both important qualities if one is hoping to win the hearts of their readers. I think she achieved a proper balance between criticizing the food critic profession without being whiny or irritating. This is something I also worked hard to achieve in Writing for Sheila.


Ratings Analysis: Theory and Practice, is one of the few textbooks I used while researching Writing for Sheila. Many of the books I read were memoirs, which I used as a model for the different styles and formats that are being published in the market today. This book served a much different and much needed purpose. Ratings Analysis is a thorough, well-researched book that explains how television audience ratings work and why they are both important and controversial. The authors have attempted to take a very
complicated subject matter and make it readable and understandable for the average person.

I used what I learned in *Ratings Analysis* to help as I wrote my Afterword to *Writing for Sheila*. I wanted to include a section at the end of the book that gave more concrete evidence as to why I believe Sheila is being underestimated by modern television journalists. Aside from my own experiences, my memoir needed some historic context. *Ratings Analysis* provided this by giving a thorough history of how television ratings systems evolved from simple, ineffective guesses about the number of audience members, into complicated, somewhat scientific measurement tools. The book also helped to confirm some of my own assumptions and observations about television ratings and how they influence news broadcast content. The authors wrote extensively about the gender stereotypes surrounding female news viewers, saying, “When you talk about an audience of women or 18 to 34-year-olds, everybody knows exactly what you’re talking about. On the other hand, there may be important differences between two men of the same age, differences that are potentially important to an advertiser” (Webster & Lichty 21). I used this information in my Afterword to strengthen my memoir’s argument that Sheila is not always the uneducated, ignorant woman who I was constantly told to target when I worked as a television reporter. I think it’s important for readers to see that marketing consultants really are using stereotypes to make important decisions about television content. This book helped provide that.

*Ratings Analysis* also provided textual evidence for the argument in my Afterword that says that television ratings are unreliable and biased. The book described the many ways in which market researchers attempt to figure out how many people are
watching television at a given time, and from which demographic and geographic
category they fall under. The authors talked about historical methods as well as modern
ones, as well as the potential for error in both. They describe how technological advances
continue to make it even more difficult to predict viewer span. “The difficulty with
electronic media is that its audience has a unique intangible quality. Unlike the print
media, which can document readers with concrete figures on the number of issues they
sell, broadcasters have to rely on estimates of who is out there listening” (Webster &
Lichty 4). This helped strengthen my argument that the consultants I met while working
at KOLO television were wrong about who was most likely watching our TV newscast,
and that there truly is no absolute way to measure broadcast viewership.