

## 5-MINUTE MEMOIR

Tales From the Writing Life

## True Story

DAPHNE LARKIN

It was 1970 and my boyfriend and I had just arrived in New York • from Florida with a car, a puppy, \$400 and an invitation from a college friend to stay with her until we got settled.

I answered an ad in *The New York Times*, along with 100 other people, for a job that turned out to be for *True Story* • magazine. With a circulation of close to 2 million, it was the largest “confession magazine” in the country. As an English lit teacher, my head was filled with Shakespeare, Hemingway, Faulkner and Fitzgerald, as well as the notion that I could live, if not write, the Great American Novel. But I was 24 and needed a job, and this one looked like fun.

I was hired at \$135 a week to edit stories written by professional writers; the *real* true stories in the slush pile were (scandal!) returned unread. Sometimes, I modeled in the photos that accompanied the stories (“Four Babies, Four Fathers, but I’m Still a Virgin”). But I wanted to write, and seemed to have a knack for the “sin, suffer and repent” niche, so I went to work for *Secret Story* and *Intimate Romances*.

It was a crazy time, what with making up all kinds of racy stories (“I Begged My Dying Boyfriend for a Baby”) and occasionally modeling for them (“Trapped Into Motherhood by One Night of Passion—Used and Abandoned, Pregnant and Ashamed”), plus writing a column (under the byline of Dr. Harris M. Grant) answering readers’ questions. My favorite: “Can I get pregnant from oral sex?”

During the fourth year of these shenanigans, I quit my staff job and teamed up with a colleague to co-write confession stories on a freelance basis. By now, my boyfriend and I had married and moved into my colleague’s Chelsea apartment building. Going to work meant a short elevator ride from my floor to hers, a pot of coffee, an electric typewriter, reams of paper and an idea that would fly with our editors. In three hours, with one of us typing and both of us composing out loud (“Let’s say this.” “How about this?” “No, I’ve got it, it’s this!”), we could produce a 20-page story, double-spaced, for \$150 each. It was nothing to get rich on, but we were having fun while our new husbands were actually earning a living.

One morning about a year into this, though—after finishing something like

“I Caught My Sister in Bed With My Husband!”—it stopped being fun. It was 1974, and Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein’s Watergate book *All the President’s Men* • hit the bestseller list. Suddenly everyone under 30 wanted to be a journalist—and I found that I did, too. Could a 29-year-old English-



teacher-turned-pulp-fiction writer become a “real” reporter? I applied to Columbia University’s graduate school.

At the opening ceremony for the journalism school, class of ’75, Dean Elie Abel welcomed us and then gave a brief overview of who we were. There were young newspaper, TV and radio reporters from around the world, many with degrees from Ivy League schools. There was an engineer, a documentary filmmaker, a book editor and a diplomat. There was also, Dean Abel added with a chuckle, a confession story writer. Everyone *ooohed*.

I would go on to have a career writing for the United Nations, *Parenting* magazine, *Newsweek International* and a New York TV evening newscast. But today when I mention my 40-plus-year writing career, it’s the pulp fiction everyone wants to hear about. And that’s a true story!

Daphne Larkin wrote an award-winning column on raising a child with disabilities for *Parenting* magazine and is now writing a memoir about her son, Lucien, who died at 10.

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