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—SALLY JENKINS, columnist and feature writer, *Washington Post*

# A FAREWELL TO ARMS, LEGS & JOCKSTRAPS

a sportswriter's memoir

DIANE K. SHAH

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**ARMS,  
LEGS  
& JOCKSTRAPS**

A SPORTSWRITER'S MEMOIR



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# 1

## Call Me “Tolerated”

I WAS EARLY, OBVIOUSLY.

Through the open ballroom doors, I could see a handful of men seated at round banquet tables covered with starched white cloths. I consulted my watch again. 6:03 p.m.

I had checked into the hotel maybe an hour before and, after dropping off my suitcase in my room, rode the elevator down to the second floor to pick up my credentials. There had been a bit of a fuss when I had phoned a week earlier to request them. The man I spoke to had put me on hold, presumably to consult a higher authority, then finally came back on the line and said, “Hell, why not?”

Even so, I worried they might give me a hard time when I showed up. I was wrong. I was handed my credentials for the All-Star Game and told, with a chuckle, “Well, this is a first.” The man then gave me a goody bag. I carried it to the lobby and sat down, hoping to see a familiar face, someone I could have dinner with. The thought of eating a room-service meal by myself was depressing.

I opened the goody bag and began pawing through it. The contents made me smile. A Gillette razor, a pack of razor blades, a tie-pin, men’s deodorant, a pen and . . . wait, what was this? A square, sealed envelope.

I tore it open. Inside was an invitation to a dinner that evening for sportswriters and the baseball players selected for the game to be played the next night. Salvation! *No room-service meal after all*, I thought. I reread the invitation. The dinner was called for 6 p.m.

I checked my watch. It was 5:45. I hurried back to my room and grabbed a reporter’s notebook. This would be fun! I could chat with

other sportswriters, meet some ballplayers, and maybe extract a colorful quote or two. Pausing in front of the mirror, I ran a comb through my long, dark hair; applied pink lipstick; and studied the navy cotton dress I had on. It was wrinkled, but it would have to do.

Now, as I was about to step into the ballroom, a man standing off to the left quickly intercepted me. He gave me an unwelcome look. "This is a private dinner," he announced. "Sorry."

I pasted on my best smile. "This is the Baseball Writers' dinner, right?"

"Yes. Obviously, you have the wrong ballroom."

"No, I have the right ballroom." I made a move to enter.

He moved with me. "I can't allow you in."

I put away my smile and pulled the invitation from my purse. "I'm invited."

He barely glanced at the invitation. "Clearly, there's been a mistake. This dinner is stag. Women are *not* allowed."

"I'm allowed. I'm a writer with the *National Observer*. I'm here for the All-Star Game, and this invitation was given to *me*."

"It shouldn't have been."

My eyes slid from his frown to his jacket lapel. The name on the badge pinned to it identified him as Hal Middlesworth, the public relations director for the Detroit Tigers. Since the game was being played in Detroit, he had apparently been given door-approval duty. I brightened. Paul Hood, the senior managing editor at the *National Observer*, had told me he and Middlesworth had been army buddies.

I smoothly reapplied my smile. "Paul Hood is one of my editors," I said sweetly. "He sends his warmest wishes. He also said I could come to you if I have any problems." I paused. "Apparently, I have a problem."

Middlesworth nodded. "Paul's a good guy. Tell him I said hello. But this is not something I can help you with." He offered me a pretend smile. "I'm sure Paul would understand."

"Mr. Middlesworth," I tried again, "this invitation was included with my credentials. Nowhere on the invitation is the word *stag*."

Middlesworth turned his head to check the invitations of two men who were allowed to waltz right in. Then he returned his attention to me.

"You may be credentialed for the game, but not this dinner."

"Really?" I said. "So you mean to tell me that 500 sportswriters are coming to Detroit, just for the dinner? I doubt it. They are here to cover the game and this, by extension, is part of it."

"Miss, you are only credentialed for the game. The dinner is separate. And as I said, the dinner is strictly a stag affair. Men only."

I grinned and lowered my voice. "You mean . . . they tell dirty jokes? Do naked women pop out of cakes?"

Middlesworth reddened. "Of course not!"

That he had blushed gave me hope that he realized how ridiculous this situation was. But having been in the army, he had learned to follow orders, I assumed, and he wasn't going to break rank. Frantically, I tried to think of something else I could say, but I had run out of arguments. While every other sportswriter in town was attending an event from which I was being excluded, I would be sent to my room like a naughty child, to choke down a lukewarm dinner. I felt humiliated. I started to turn away.

Then I stopped.

Suddenly, from out of nowhere, a voice that sounded strangely like my own announced, "Well, I'm going in. You'll have to bodily remove me!"

Where that came from I will never know. But I strode into the ballroom, my two-inch heels clicking loudly on the floor. And with each step, I was sure my arm would be yanked and I would be hauled out of there. But then I was standing at the first table, where the Cincinnati catcher Johnny Bench was sitting by himself. "Johnny," I said, "remember me? May I join you?"

Bench smiled. "Of course, sit down."



The dinner, it turned out, was almost not worth the effort it took to bust in. The speeches could not have been duller, and not a single naked lady jumped out of a cake. There were three other men at my table who said little. Thankfully, Bench had invited country and western singer Bobby Goldsboro, and the two of them were fun to listen to.

Afterward, Bench said, "Why don't you all come up to my room? I've got beer."

So the four of us, plus Goldsboro and Bench, trooped up to his room. And it was there, *Mr. Hal Middlesworth*, that I found the lead to my story. I wrote:

“Johnny Bench was, as usual, stealing the show. There he was, the night before the All-Star Game, in his hotel room, host to a party; and the fact that singer Bobby Goldsboro was the guest of honor hardly daunted Johnny. Goldsboro wound up in a dark corner, strumming his guitar as accompaniment for, who else? Bench. ‘*When you’re hot, you’re hot. When you’re not, you’re not,*’ bellowed the catcher, who wouldn’t know what it’s like to be ‘not.’

“Sure enough, next night he was hot,” I continued, and I went on to describe his second-inning two-run homer and his tug-of-war with Baltimore Orioles third baseman Brooks Robinson. In the fourth inning, Brooks made a sensational play on a grounder by Bench, throwing him out at first. In the seventh, Bench retaliated. First, he faked a bunt down the third-base line. Robinson moved up and closer to the line in case Bench was serious about bunting. But on the next pitch, Bench smashed a grounder past Robinson’s outstretched left hand for a clean single.

Several days after my article appeared, I received a letter from Middlesworth. “Dear Diane: Congratulations on your excellent story on the All-Star Game. It was a fine piece of writing and it certainly captured the essence of the event.

“I hope I did not offend you—and I assume I did not—about your presence at the usually stag dinner. You set a precedent, apparently with no serious results. Congratulations!”

He sent a slightly different version to Paul Hood:

“Your young lady wrote a fine story on the All-Star Game. She also knocked down the writers’ barrier at the social events. No damage was done, and I assume women will now be welcome—or at least tolerated—in the future.”



That dinner was the first of many “let-me-in!” farces I had a starring role in. Still, each time a door was slammed in my face, I was genuinely surprised. I had never focused on being a “female” sportswriter or how

the world would react. I didn't care. I was a sportswriter, period, and all I ever wanted was to get the story. Whatever it took.

I had no idea—*none*—what those stories would be. It never occurred to me that I would break into the White House—literally—or pick up my phone to hear the startling voice of *Cary Grant*. Or cause California Angels manager Gene Mauch to break into tears. Nor could I have imagined Paul Newman slamming the phone down on me. Or that one October night I would go out on patrol with three newly minted Moscow cops, rusty Kalashnikovs splayed across their laps.

Nor did I have an inkling that one morning, while driving to work along the Santa Monica Freeway, I would spot, right in front of me, a Los Angeles city bus with my face plastered across the back window. And I certainly never imagined that, according to the Boston Red Sox, I would—apparently, all by myself—destroy the American family. *Me?*

In the end, it wasn't a matter of hurdling a few barriers. It was so much bigger than that. To me, it was all showbiz, pure and simple. One riveting tale after another played out in real time. And I had muscled my way to a seat in the audience. Right up front.

## 2

### Can't Hire a Girl for That!

I HAVE OFTEN WONDERED WHO THAT WOMAN WAS, THE ONE who strode so boldly into the forbidden dinner, the one who declared, “You’ll have to bodily remove me!” Had I heard that line in a movie? Certainly, that wasn’t me. I was shy. As a child I had a hard time making eye contact. My father was strict. You didn’t talk back. You *obeyed*. But in time, I realized the professional me bore little resemblance to the kid growing up.

I was born in Chicago, but my family moved to Highland Park, an upmarket suburb north of the city, when I was eight. Although I had a younger sister, my parents used to joke that I was an only child, because I would plant myself in my bedroom, door closed, reading Nancy Drew and other books—or talking on my Princess phone—until I had to emerge for dinner. In fact, soon after we moved into our two-story house, I woke up my four-year-old sister one Sunday morning and said, “How would you like your own bedroom!” Without waiting for a reply, I began moving her bed and dresser out of our bedroom, down the hall, and into the guest room.

My Brooklyn-born father had been deployed to Navy Pier during World War II, met my mother, and they married. When I was four, my mother pointed to an airplane flying overhead and told me we were going to travel in one of those to New York. How, I asked, looking upward, could I fit into that little-bitty plane? In New York I met two cousins and became a pen pal with one of them, Danny, who was my age. At some point we began writing to each other. Whenever one of Danny’s letters arrived, I would race upstairs to my bedroom and quickly pencil a reply. I found I loved writing back.

When I was 12, a friend of my mother asked what I wanted to do when I grew up. I said I wanted to be a writer but added I didn't think I was creative enough to write a book, so I wasn't sure. The friend suggested journalism. I said, "What's that?" She explained it was writing stories for a newspaper. This sounded incredibly dull, but it gave me something to consider. Even at that age, I didn't think I could write books like Nancy Drew. But newspapers? *Hmm.*

I think it was seventh grade when I discovered that maybe, just maybe, I could be a little creative. For English class I wrote a short story called "The Car of Life and Death." I don't remember the plot, but since I read mystery novels, it probably was suspenseful. The teacher called on me to stand in front of the class and read my story aloud. Before I could finish, the bell rang. I paused, expecting everyone to jump up and bury me in the stampede for the door. But not one student moved. I finished reading the last page and a half. Only then did everyone dash out.

*Wow!* I thought. *Wow!*



Although I soon became obsessed with being a journalist, pretty much the only journalism I read as a kid was in the sports pages. I had few qualities that portended journalism would be a wise career choice. I read books about famous reporters, and they all stressed that you needed to be curious, aggressive, and familiar with the dictionary. I had little curiosity outside of baseball, I was painfully shy, and looking up words in the dictionary seemed too much trouble. I only wanted to write.

My misguided outlook was hammered into me my senior year in high school, when my guidance counselor summoned me to his office. By then, I had earned my first real byline, in my hometown paper, the *Highland Park News*. I was 14 years old and chosen to write a story about students taking over the town's government for a day. After school I worked on the Highland Park High School newspaper and somehow landed a bimonthly column for the *Waukegan News Sun*. It was called *HPHS something*, and I haven't a clue what I wrote.

This guidance counselor asked about my plans after college. I said, "I want to write for *Time* or *Newsweek*."

He shook his head. “*Time* and *Newsweek* each have about fifteen writers, all middle-aged, all men. What else would you like to do?”

In truth, I hadn’t thought any of this through, so I blurted out the only thing I could think of. “Then I want to be a sportswriter!”

He rolled his eyes. “Dear, no editor will hire you. Sports reporters have to go into locker rooms, and girls can’t do that.” He sighed. “I suggest you go home and start thinking *sensibly* about your future.”

For some reason, this blast of cold reality did not faze me.

I was going to be a journalist no matter what.



Although women’s lib hadn’t surfaced yet, I began to realize there were jobs women were not allowed to do. Had I been a man, I would have applied for a copy boy’s job at the *Chicago Daily News* or *Sun-Times* or *Tribune*. That was how many male journalists got their start. But something told me I would not be hired for that. Nope, I would have to get a journalism degree.

In a hurry, I graduated from Indiana University in three and a half years. I wrote for the *Indiana Daily Student* and, the summer between my final two semesters, I carried a bunch of clips to the oddly named *Bloomington Herald-Telephone*, where I was hired as a reporter for the summer. Then, that fall, a new paper appeared, the *Bloomington Tribune*. I hadn’t even heard of it when I got a phone call offering me a part-time job until I graduated in January; then I could work full-time. I agreed and was handed the education beat. In June, I announced I was leaving. My boyfriend was graduating, and I wanted to go to Europe for the summer. The editor said I mustn’t leave and offered to make me the highest-paid writer on the staff. But despite this inexplicable offer, Bloomington was not my kind of town. I wanted the big time—Chicago or New York. When I again said no, thank you, he said, “You’re making a big mistake. Someday, you could be the most famous woman journalist in Indiana!”

I gulped, smiled, and fled.



I got married, moved to Washington, DC, and began to hunt for a writing job. Nobody wanted me. I could not help noticing that most of my male

classmates had secured newspaper jobs, while I kept trying to find one. I had no trouble reaching managing editors to ask for a job. Back then you simply dialed the newspaper's number, asked for the M.E., and were put right through. Also, back then, managing editors did not mince words.

"Just got married, eh? Well, soon you'll be having babies. Sorry."

Or "Only thing available is the four-to-midnight shift. Can't hire a girl for that."

I didn't know what to do with myself. We didn't have much furniture in the one-bedroom apartment we rented, so there wasn't much I could do at home. Lacking anything meaningful to occupy me, I was horrified to discover I was having trouble stringing coherent sentences together. When my husband came home from his job as a TV director at a local station, he could tell me about his day, but all I had to offer was that the price of tomatoes had gone up.

Desperate to do *something*, I took a job selling sportswear at Lord & Taylor in Bethesda. And every lunch hour I carried a handful of coins into a payphone booth. Over the next two months, I called every newspaper, magazine, wire service, and radio and TV station in the DC metropolitan area. Sometimes a managing editor would tell me to call back. "Something might be opening up soon." And call back I did—to no avail. Meanwhile, I had put together quite a résumé. After Lord & Taylor, I wrote newspaper ads for a department store under the tutelage of two men who screamed at each other all day, and at Christmas, I sold cosmetics at Saks.

I might add that I struck out completely at *Newsweek*. Ignoring my guidance counselor's advice, I wrangled an interview with the Washington bureau chief, who asked what I wanted to do. "Be a writer," I declared.

Two weeks later, I received a letter saying that I didn't have the experience to be a *Newsweek* writer, but might I be interested in a reporting or research job? I hastily wrote back that I was. Two weeks later, another letter arrived. I really wasn't qualified to be a reporter or researcher, it said, but I might consider applying for an opening as the bureau's part-time librarian. Yes, of course, I eagerly wrote back. The third and final letter said, "Sorry. We just hired a college guy for that position."

At 23, I was clearly washed up. And miserable. All I had ever wanted in life was to be a writer. (Okay, after I figured out that being a cowgirl

wasn't going to happen.) I had grown up in a wealthy suburb, and I prayed—actually prayed—that I wouldn't end up getting married and living in a house with two powder-blue Mercedes in the driveway, as one of my classmates had. I didn't want *that*—I wanted adventure.

This was the end of the 1960s, a topsy-turvy decade filled with rebellious youngsters, long tangled hair and ratty clothes, blaring music, communes, shocking assassinations, and a war everybody seemed to hate. My husband and I lived in a three-building complex called Eldorado Towers in Silver Spring, Maryland, not far from where he grew up. Some nights his brother and several of their friends—including a young Catholic priest—would come over, smoke marijuana, and talk about overthrowing the government. The priest would tell us how he agonized over the church's ban on birth control and how many in his poor parish desperately desired it. What to do? What to do about America? Leave it? Go to Canada? All this was debated amid plumes of pot smoke.

Twenty years later, I met a lawyer in Los Angeles who, after getting his law degree, worked several years for the FBI. I mentioned Eldorado Towers, and this lawyer, Jay Grodin, said he had lived there too, at about the same time. "That's where they housed us during our first year at Quantico," he said. I burst out laughing. If only we had known we were breaking the law just down the hall from dozens of FBI agents!

Eventually, I did land a journalism job with *Roll Call*. A sort of *Politico* before *Politico*, it was an inside look at doings on Capitol Hill that I wasn't sure anyone read. After routinely getting lost on DC's alphabetical one-way streets, I would walk into a federal building and stare down a hall that stretched for blocks and then turn right, only to start down another hall that stretched for more blocks. *Maybe*, I thought dismally, *I ought to find another career*. But I couldn't come up with anything. Some nights I could hardly sleep.

Then everything changed.

My first job interview after arriving in Washington had been at the *National Observer*, a Dow Jones-owned weekly like *Time* or *Newsweek*, only in newspaper form. I had spoken with the managing editor, Roscoe Born, and he—like most of the others I would soon meet—took a few notes on a three-by-five index card, slid it into a metal card file box, and said he would be in touch if something opened up.

Eight months later, shortly after I had begun working at *Roll Call*, he phoned to say he had a job that might interest me. Dow Jones also published a weekly current events newspaper called *Spotlight* for junior high school students. The staff consisted of one editor, one art person, and one writer. The writing job was available. “And maybe,” Mr. Born said, “in a couple of years, we could give you a story for the *Observer*.”

*Good God*, I thought, how boring this sounded. Writing for junior high school kids? But my husband thought it was a gamble worth taking, the pay was enticing, and there was a chance I could write for the *Observer*—someday. The paper was extremely well written and highly regarded, so I took the job. I gave the boredom factor three months to kick in.

After two and a half months, I was already twitching when Mr. Born summoned me to a large conference room with a desk at the far end. He was seated behind this desk, and it seemed to take me forever to reach it. He had bad news. *Spotlight* was folding, leaving him with two choices. He could put me on the *Observer* staff or he could let me go. “I know you gave up a job to come here, so I am going to put you on staff.”

Later I learned that Born had tossed me up for grabs and that no editor would take me on—except for one, Lionel Linder, who, it turned out, was the best mentor any reporter could wish for. The first story he assigned me was to fly to New York to interview Jean Nidetch, the founder of Weight Watchers. I turned the story in late one afternoon. The next morning, he called me over.

“Kid, you did a great job,” he enthused and carried on for several minutes praising my work. Then he said, “Pull up a chair. I think we can do a couple of things to make it even better.” He tapped my story with a blue pencil. “Here, look at the fifth graf. That’s your lead. See? Now the second graf should be . . .”

Basically, we rearranged—rewrote—the entire story, though he left me feeling I had created a masterpiece all by myself. Normally, the *Observer* ran five stories on page one. My Weight Watchers piece was good enough for front-page consideration, I was told, but according to one editor in the room, “It came in number six.”

My second story, about a weird yoga camp in Canada where you couldn’t talk, did land on page one, and after that, so did most of my stories.

I was stunned by my good fortune; not only was I the youngest staff writer (also the lowest paid) but one of the first female journalists Dow Jones had ever hired. Indeed, two years before, when an editor from the *Wall Street Journal* came to Indiana University to interview prospective hires, a department secretary called me two hours before my meeting to inform me the *Journal* did not hire women. “You should go anyway,” she said. I decided not to bother.

Six months into this job, a new editor-in-chief arrived at the *Observer*. He was Henry Gemmill, a highly regarded writer and editor from the *Wall Street Journal*. During one of our first meetings, he said, “I really don’t know what to do with you. I not only have never worked with a woman, but I never considered that I was writing for one.”

Despite these ominous words, I got along well with Henry although—as it turned out—maybe too well. From time to time, he asked me to lunch. We’d talk about stories I might do, or he would comment on stories I had done. One day he took me to lunch at a pricey French restaurant in Georgetown. Afterward, as we got into his car (the first Mercedes I had ever ridden in), I realized we had not talked about story ideas or the paper at all. Why, I wondered, did we have lunch? But as soon he started driving up Connecticut Avenue, he “proposed”—he was quite the gentleman—that we have an affair.

*Oh god, I thought. It will take 25 minutes to drive back to the office . . . what am I to do?*

“Henry,” I said, “I am so flattered that you are interested in me. A man like *you*. But I am married. And I work for you. Sometimes I get a little crazy. Like, if I got a pay raise, I would wonder if I really deserved it. Or if I didn’t get a raise, I would think, Oh dear, he’s punishing me. I’m so sorry, Henry, but I don’t think such an . . . er, arrangement could work.”

I don’t remember what else was said during that interminable ride, but when I walked into the newsroom, Nina Totenberg, our amazing Supreme Court reporter (who would go on to become one of the best in country) grabbed me. “Is Henry hitting on you?” she asked. I nodded. She said, “Me, too.” That night, Nina came to my apartment—my husband was working—and we camped out in the kitchen. I opened a bottle of wine, and while Nina sat on a countertop, I made us something to eat.

“What if we went to New York?” I said.

“You think they would believe us?” Nina said. Since we were the first—or among the first—women reporters Dow Jones had hired, and since Henry was a Dow Jones star, we couldn’t imagine Dow Jones executives in New York, specifically *Wall Street Journal* executive editor Warren Phillips, doing anything to help. Unable to concoct a strategy, we finished our wine and put our problem on hold.

Yet my success at the *Observer* had made me think, *screw it. If Henry tries to interfere with me, I’ll quit and go to the Washington Post.* (Assuming, of course, they would hire me.) To my relief, Henry never raised the subject again, and I kept getting good assignments and pay raises. But this experience taught me two things. One, I could think on my feet (or in a car). And two, I could take care of myself. Both lessons would serve me well when I plunged into the macho world of sports.

**DIANE K. SHAH** is a former journalist and the first female sports columnist for a major daily newspaper. She is the author of four mystery novels and the coauthor of *Chief: My Life in the LAPD*, a *New York Times* bestseller with police chief Daryl Gates, and *Relentless*, photographer Neil Leifer's memoir. She lives in New York City.