

The Reporter`s Tale

Sheila Macdonald

Embarking on a new career in a field as competitive as journalism takes a lot of guts. Sheila was twenty-seven when she started working for the Milton Keynes Gazette – quite a bit older than most cub reporters.

“In this job there`s no point being a shrinking violet because you`ll just shrink away and nobody will notice you. We`re all quite egotistical, you`ve got to be to do this job. You need the self-confidence to be able to knock on the door of a complete stranger and say: “Hi, it`s me. Tell me about your most intimate personal life.”

My parents moved down to Leighton Buzzard fourteen years ago. I was in secretarial college in Scotland at the time, so I stayed behind to finish that and then moved down to be with them. They started running a boarding house there and I started commuting to London to work as a secretary. I was about seventeen then. I did that for a couple of years and then I actually got a job on the building site of Bletchley Leisure Centre as a secretary. That was quite good. I used to do daft things like, I`d get really bored and put on a donkey jacket and go down on the building site. I`d help them count how many doors had arrived for the for the stockman or order lorry loads of gravel and grit and things. And if it rained you had to go to the postbox in your willies and donkey jacket so that was good fun. I didn`t actually ever see the Leisure Centre completed because I decided to go to university then. I went to study at Birmingham doing social studies for four years. I majored in psychology. Meanwhile, during those four years my parents lived in New Bradwell and the new city was starting to get built. I used to come back on holidays and get on buses that were going the wrong way and there were no signposts and I used to hate the place. I had four sisters that had all moved into the area, but not having a car and not being a driver I had to rely on the buses and, as I say, Milton Keynes was just being built and you always seemed to get dumped in the middle of nowhere.

I went abroad for three years after I finished university, got married, came back again and by that time Milton Keynes had really grown and I could find my way on the buses and the question mark that was supposed to be a hospital by then was going to be real hospital. So what did I do then? I hung about for a bit, my parents had moved to Stantonbury by this time. I was over in Germany for five months and that`s when I decided I wanted to be a journalist. So I came back and worked as a temp, during the day with a firm on Blakelands and did my freelance journalism as well for about a year. The first time I saw my name attached to a story I rushed home and pasted it in a scrap book and thought of the sixteen thousand people who`d read it and then after a while you think yeh, but none of them will remember my name or what`s been written.

A Story to Me

There were some silly things happening in Milton Keynes then that obviously hit your eye as something that people would want to know about like, I would be sitting working away in Blakelands, miles from any water and this lorry would drive past with a barge on it heading off for the motorway. I thought, my God, what's a barge doing up here? – It just happened to be a firm that did the old traditional designs on the barges and they hadn't been able to get a site on water so they had to work away from water. So, that was a story I did and I did one about Stantonbury Campus because at that time it was very forward looking in comparison to a lot of the older more established schools, and they were introducing more equality into the curriculum, and that appeared to be a story to me. And then we had the Buddhist colony down at Willen Lake and one of the nuns there, Nara, is an English girl which I thought was unusual. I did something on that and `She` magazine bought it from me. So I thought, right, this is it, I'm on my way. Luckily a job came up with the Gazette so I applied for and got it and I've been there ever since.

The first horrible story you get to do once you start taking on some responsibility, is going along to interview a family of someone who's either committed suicide or died in a car accident or something like that, it really hit me in the gut. Suddenly it's not all nicey-nicey reporting, it's doing things you don't want to do so that you can communicate to other people. The first death story I remember – I don't know if it's the first one I ever did, but it was the first one I really felt sick about – was when a bloke had hung himself in his back shed at Heelands. I went along to interview the family andI don't know, you seem to switch onto a purely informational level. You turn off any emotions. Your job is to go in there, to get the facts and to try not to upset anybody too much. You have to feel you're doing them a service if all their neighbours can read the paper it means the family won't have to do too much explaining. With a bit of luck they're not going to meet somebody in the street who asks about the health of the deceased. You knock on the door and say: "I'm terribly sorry to bother you, I'm from the Milton Keynes Gazette. I've come to talk to you about the terrible tragedy ..." and all the rest of it. You know then if they're glad to share the burden with another person or resent the intrusion. They'll invite you in then it's a question of going through the facts with them. "Oh, who found your husband? Where was he?"

"He was actually hanging from a rope in the shed." You're watching yourself and thinking, "Oh, my God, how can I do this? How can I ask these questions?" I did all this, got my facts and figures, enough to write a story and drove the car away round the bend and I couldn't drive any further. I had to sit there for a while. I was shaking and felt sick at myself for what I was doing and felt sick for those poor people. Nobody knew he was going to kill himself. I don't think I'll ever get hardened to it. But reporters are a bit like undertakers, we've got a wicked sense of humour. We make jokes about people who have died and the way that it happened between ourselves.

You do get a bit cynical but when you're actually meeting the people who it has happened to I think you'd have to have been born a pretty hard person not to let it get to you. It does always touch you. Having said that, relatives often like to talk about it because by the time you see them they've already spent three days with relatives who are sick to death of hearing how miserable they are, or, they feel themselves: "Oh, God, I mustn't keep going on about it. It's very nice of my sister to come and look after the kids. I must try and appear calm." So the reporter is another ear for them to tell things to, and with a bit of luck they're not going to meet somebody on the street who says: "I haven't seen your Ian for a while, how is he?" That's part of the reporting. It's not nice to do, but you can see it's worthwhile.

Heart-warming Stories

There are some heart-warming stories too – elderly people who get married. I must admit that we tend to groan at the thought of doing another golden wedding. They always say the same thing. You say to them: "You've obviously managed to survive the marriage for fifty years and that's quite a thing these days, How have you managed it?" And they always say without exception: "Oh, we've had our ups and downs. We've had our good times and bad." And you think you'll go mad if anyone else says that. I like the really daft stories like the practical jokers who bought their Italian friend a donkey for his birthday because they always said that Italians weren't fit to be driving cars. I went along to do this story about this poor guy. He didn't know what to do. It was in his back garden and he thought he had it for life.

I must admit I enjoy living in Milton Keynes and through my job I've met loads of nice people. Most places I go I can usually see somebody who I've met before so it makes a very varied social life for me. But career-wise there isn't another move I can make here unless I go into radio because there isn't an evening paper in Milton Keynes. The only way to stay here would be to commute to London and work in Fleet Street or on a magazine, or to work on the evening paper in Northampton. Part of me says, I really like living here, I've got most of the things I need. I've got a nice house and a garden and friends, a lot of good friends, is it worth moving for my career? A lot of people hate it here but I think Milton Keynes is what you make it and to me, a place may have lots of discos but you don't get to know people in discos, you can't possibly because they can't hear a bloody word you're saying. It's nicer to have good pubs and places where there is live music and we've got that. Many people don't look for what's good in Milton Keynes. So much money gets poured into projects in this place and three people turn up and there's another thirty or forty people who'd really have enjoyed it if they'd made the effort. I'm not keen to move but in the end my career is important to me. I wouldn't call myself a ball-chopping career woman but eventually I may well have to move away. I'd like a job on an evening paper as the next step then . . . I don't know, see what comes up. I quite fancy a column of my own.

I've got quite an enormous ego and I'd like to sound off and pontificate in a Fleet Street paper about things I didn't or did like.