

Twelve

Resigning for "Health Reasons"

I.

NEW EDITOR—NO PUSSYCAT

It is a well-known and possibly documentable fact that a significant number of cartoonists either resign or get fired when their newspapers change editors. I lasted four years, but I should have quit sooner.

Shortly before the new editor arrived at *The Greenville News*, I had a dream that comforted me at the time but which proved to be prophetic in a way I did not anticipate. I dreamed that, pulling into my driveway after a short trip, I was horrified to notice that my front door was ajar. Local TV news and public service ads had just begun warning (terrifying) a formerly untroubled citizenry of new threats lurking in modern life. One message in particular had me spooked: "Never Enter Your Home If The Door Is Open When You Get There—The Burglar May Still Be Inside!" In my dream, I entered anyway, fearing the worst—not that I'd be hurt, but that the house would look like one of those chaotic homes in the movies that have been ransacked (which is to say that it would be even *more* of a mess than I had left it). Imagine my surprise, then, when I saw that, instead of tossing the house for valuables, the burglar had *cleaned* and *organized* it! It had never looked better! I was both confused and delighted.

Some dreams are so vivid, they wake you up. So I woke Jim, described my dream, and told him that I thought it meant that the new editor would be *good* for me—would help me get my thoughts organized and rid my mind of all the clutter. Jim grunted "Hah!" and turned back over. But I was optimistic.

I should have realized that order can't be imposed from the outside; it has to come from within. I should have known that the irrational, convoluted thinking which produced my cartoons would not suddenly become coherent simply because my editor was a person who valued clear thinking. That dream, which comforted me at the time, I now interpret as a warning for me to straighten up and fly right.

As the new editor's influence began to assert itself, people gradually stopped goofing around at work. The environment became really professional and businesslike—which, if you've read this far, you'll understand was a real hardship on me. I can be professional and businesslike only for short periods at a time. My previous bosses, who hardly ever pulled rank, had always just ignored me as I flung myself dramatically around the office, proclaiming outrageous things I didn't mean. But the editorial regime-change brought with it an unwritten hissy-fit embargo. You might not think this is so awful, but then you are probably a normal person who never got sent out of class for giving a smartass answer during parents' day in the second grade.

The fact that the arrival of the new editor coincided with the 1980 election of Ronald Reagan undoubtedly contributed to my discomfiture. *The Greenville News* was a conservative paper that had heartily applauded my jabs at Jimmy Carter. The Powers That Be were pretty horrified when I tried to do the same things—or worse—to Ronald Reagan. This made it more difficult to

get cartoons approved. As the cartoon rejections piled up, I gradually became more frantic and insecure than is normal even for editorial cartoonists—and this led to *internal* hissy fits, which can trigger all sorts of physical ailments.

In 1984, it became clear that the Democrats would nominate Mondale, and that Reagan's "Morning in America" would keep on shining—with the Olympics in Los Angeles and everything. I realized that the chances of my getting a Democratic president to kick around were not so great.

I also began to worry about my kids, because in those days there was no after-school care, and James and Salley had both outgrown the childcare establishments in town. James and Salley were "latchkey kids," a much-deplored social phenomenon resulting from the growing number of us "Working Women Who Wanted It All."

Producing acceptable cartoons took longer and longer, and I had to stay later and later at work to complete them. My husband's work took him out of town overnight for a few days almost every week, and in the winter I was never home before dark. I did become more disciplined, but my ability to glean specific information from text did not improve. I had to highlight George Will's columns like term paper assignments. One day I realized I had just underlined every single sentence in his column, trying to understand it. I began to think that I had never been a good cartoonist—and that I wasn't smart enough to become a good cartoonist.

I felt like I was juggling seven or eight delicate glass balls that I could not drop: husband, children, work, home, social obligations—even Christmas cards and thank-you notes. Each sphere looked the same when it was in the air—but if I were to drop one, I would then see that some of the "glass" balls turned out to be balloons—or soap bubbles. I couldn't tell until one had shattered or floated away whether it had been delicate glass or just hot air. To complicate things further, other people would stand on the sidelines and suggest that I simply let some of them go and forget them. Most folks expected me to walk away from my work without a second thought, assuming that, as a woman, my family "came first." It was emphatically *not* a contest between my family and my work. I needed them both.

No one ever seemed to question the dedication of professional *men* to their families or remarked upon *their* ability to blend work and family. The problem for me was the *workplace*—not the work itself. I was as passionate about my work as any male who loves his. The problem was never my family. Our home was—and is—a messy, cluttered sanctuary.

In the early 1980s, if a woman with children had problems at work, those problems were invariably compounded by the lack of childcare, carpooling resources, and community support. If she became overwhelmed, she was expected to resign quietly, citing the necessity to "spend more time with her family." (That phrase, when uttered by a man, has lately become a laughable euphemism for "If I don't resign, they're gonna fire me.")

I know now that my work situation wasn't much worse than that of dozens of today's cartoonists—and it wasn't as bad as some of the horror stories I've heard lately at the conventions and on the Association of American Editorial Cartoonists' Listserv. Also, as a person who doesn't work and play well with others, I'm proud to have lasted so long in one place as a political cartoonist. I was employed at *The Greenville News* longer than I'd lasted anywhere else. It was my personal best.

But in the winter of 1984, at what should have been the height of my career, I resigned from the only job I'd ever been good at, citing "philosophical differences" with my newspaper. It was the truth, but I caught hell for it. I'm sure they would have preferred my resignation letter to state that I wanted to spend more time with my family.

I should have paraphrased another Frank Howard quote. In 1969, when he resigned as the Clemson football coach, Howard declared that he did so "for health reasons: the alumni got sick of me."

II. WHAT KIND OF MOTHER WOULD . . . ?

Leaving work you love would be traumatic for anyone, I suppose. That was certainly true of my leaving *The Greenville News*. I missed friends and co-workers—the familiar everyday surroundings I’d come to take for granted. It was tough for me to get my bearings. In fact, I was probably what you’d call depressed. For about three weeks that winter of 1984, all I did was sit on the couch and stare into space. I refused to give interviews to TV stations or newspapers about my sudden job departure. I actually quit reading newspapers or watching the TV news—afraid I’d get a cartoon idea I couldn’t use. I didn’t cook or clean house or do much of anything. Social gatherings were torture for me. (By “social gatherings,” I mean stuff like going to the grocery store.)

At that time, Salley was in the sixth grade, and James was in the ninth. They’d come home from school and find me there on the couch, practically catatonic. They’d fix themselves snacks, then sit down and talk to me. They didn’t know from catatonic, so my unresponsiveness was fine with them. It just encouraged them to talk more. They talked about school, their classmates, projects they had to do; they worried aloud about friends, sports, and if they were popular.

You know how experts say parents should “talk to their kids”? Well, those weeks on the couch taught me that all you really have to do is let *them* talk. Just sit there and don’t say anything unless they ask you a question. You don’t even have to listen very closely. In fact, it may be better not to listen. Some of the stuff they tell you would probably be pretty disturbing if you weren’t catatonic.

I guess I was kind of like a dog. You know your dog is on your side. You can tell him anything and he won’t repeat it or call somebody’s mama or go to the principal to complain. Your dog is just happy to have you there with him.

Eventually, as I began to come out of the fog, I began to notice things again. The world, which had been so gray for so long, began to take on color once more. One morning, several months after I quit the *News*, I was having breakfast at MacDonald’s with my friend Cecile. Suddenly, delighted by a shimmering thicket of early spring trees outside the window behind her, I exclaimed, “Cecile! Look how many different *greens* there are in spring!” Since Cecile is an artist, I knew she would appreciate such a glorious sight. She looked, then turned back to me. “Wow—you *have* been depressed,” she said.

Another thing I noticed as I continued to improve was the drastic change that had taken place in societal attitudes toward working women. During the 1970s, married middle-class women with children who worked “outside the home” were relatively rare. We were, in fact, the subject of many magazine and newspaper articles and TV “Special Reports” citing the deleterious effects of daycare—now more properly called “childcare,” as my daughter-in-law, a talented preschool teacher, reminds me. (“We don’t care for the *day*; we care for the *child*,” she always points out.)

Everyone called it “daycare” then, though, and it was bad. We working mothers of the ’70s were the targets of studies which showed that the children of “stay-at-home moms” felt more secure, did better in school, and were less likely to be aggressive, get pregnant, use drugs, or wind up in jail. (“Single parents” were not even worth mentioning in those days. Their children were obviously doomed.)

I started working at *The Greenville News* in 1975, but my position was not made full-time for another two and a half years. Aubrey and McKinney did go to bat for the upgrade in 1976 or ’77,

though. They arranged an interview for me with a new mid-level manager I'd never met.

"Wear a dress," Aubrey had said.

I did.

The first thing my interviewer said was "Pretty dress."

Then he asked if I were married and if I had children. I told him that I was and I did. At that time, James and Salley were very young. He asked the children's ages. I told him. Then he asked how I could justify working full-time when I had two such young children at home. I wanted to tell him that if the Equal Rights Amendment passed, a question like that would be illegal; but I didn't. Instead, I told him that I thought my husband and I had the situation under control, and that *The Greenville News* didn't have to worry about it.

When I reported the essence of the "interview" to my editors, I don't think I'd ever seen McKinney so mad. (Unless, of course, it was at me, during a political discussion.)

I worked part-time for two more years until, in 1978, I became the first full-time editorial cartoonist in South Carolina.

The full-time position came with its own problems. I worked forty miles away from my home in Clemson, at the mercy of traffic—and, after 1980, at the whim of a new editor. If a cartoon was rejected, I had to stay at work until I came up with an acceptable alternative. Many times in the early '80s, I didn't get home until seven or eight at night. My husband traveled overnight for a couple of days almost every week for his work as a Clemson University Extension Specialist, but when he wasn't traveling, he could be home by five.

Before 1980, we lived in a neighborhood where the school bus picked the kids up almost at our door. But getting everyone safely *out* the door in the morning still posed problems. Back when James and Salley had first started school, I'd shave about fifteen minutes off their daily getting-ready-for-school time by bathing them and dressing them in their clean school clothes before they went to bed at night. My defense for letting the kids sleep in their clothes was "How dirty will those clothes get while they're *asleep*?" After half an hour at school, almost *every* kid looks like he slept in his clothes anyway.

My mother was horrified; on the other hand, Jim's family may have *thought* I was an incompetent, lazy, good-for-nothing mother, but they never—not once in more than thirty years—gave me a single indication if it.



Dyeing Easter eggs with the children.

I tried to measure myself against other mothers when it came to such things as birthday parties. My children had parties, and I baked their cakes myself—until they began to request store-bought ones. On James's seventh birthday, I decorated a special cake for him. He loved the movie *Star Wars*, so I thought a Darth Vader mask and helmet would be just the right decoration. Unfortunately, I didn't wait until the cake—which was a little lopsided to begin with—had cooled completely to apply the dark-

brown icing I'd concocted for Vader's face, and rivers of brown, goopy confectioners' sugar ran in directions that I had not intended, dripping randomly over the sides. My friend Louise (whose son is James's age) was, unfortunately, there to witness the disaster. Her helpfulness took the form of laughing derisively, causing me to protest the adequacy of my creation.

“But it *does* look like Darth Vader!” I protested. At just that moment, Salley—who was three years old at the time—passed through the kitchen.

“Salley!” Louise called. “Who does this look like?” She held the cake down for my daughter to see.



*The infamous Darth Vader cake.
(Notice how it's listing to the left.)*

Salley studied the cake carefully, aware that there *must* be a correct answer—one she should know. Finally, she looked up at Louise and gave the only answer she could think of: “Louise?” she guessed.

Not bad, I thought. Louise *did* have a pageboy hairdo reminiscent of Darth Vader's helmet. The whole incident struck us as so funny that our friends, families, the whole town of Clemson—and now our grown-up children—retell it every once and a while even now. Sometimes all you have to do is say “Darth Vader cake,” and people start laughing.

But, as I said, I tried.

There were no after-school programs for older children in those days. That meant that as they outgrew childcare, my kids joined the legions of “latchkey children”—those who wore house keys around their necks so they could let themselves in after school while their parents worked. (Even *more* articles and news stories about this alarming new harmful phenomenon saturated the media.)

When the children were a little older, we moved to a new neighborhood, where we lived at the end of a mile-long, dead-end street. James and Salley, by this time too old for daycare, disembarked from the school bus at the mouth of our street. They then had to walk that mile home—rain or shine—almost straight uphill. They had orders to call me at work the minute they got home. Salley usually used these calls to report that James had told her there were spiders in the garage, or that he was eating ice cream with his mouth open just to gross her out, while James took the opportunity to complain that Salley kept hitting him, and could he please hit her back?

I'd listen happily, glad to hear their voices.

My neighbors—my friends—were appalled at the situation, maybe because they felt responsible for my children while Jim and I weren't there. My sister Marty, then a law student, told me that DSS (the Department of Social Services) could take my children from me at any time if any of my friends, neighbors, in-laws—anyone—reported the situation. But the worst was the day James told my *mother* that he was a “latchkey child.” I caught hell for that.

James and Salley did not participate in Scouts; I'd heard too many “stay-at-home moms” voice resentment that they had to ferry the kids of “women who work” to such programs. They were able to participate in YMCA sports, though, which were held after working hours and at the same time and place for both kids, thus making it easier to get both children to these activities. Thank goodness Salley didn't pine for dance classes or Girl Scouts or gymnastics—and thank goodness she didn't mind being the only girl on her soccer team or her basketball team. She played softball, too, and James played t-ball, baseball, and soccer. We had great friends who were willing to help us carpool to the Y. We ferried as many kids as we could whenever we could, and the other parents took up the slack.

It *does* take a village to raise a child.

Jim coached Salley's softball team, and I had to coach when he was out of town. Knowing nothing about sports, my main goal was to keep the girls from crying on the field because we were losing so badly. (Crying on the bench was allowed. I felt like it myself.)

My struggles as a working mother were made more difficult by my tendency to sleep too late—another quirk of mine that met with almost universal disapproval. Being a night person, I have a hard time waking up on time anyway, but I especially dreaded those mornings when Jim was away and I had to get the kids off to school. One such morning, while the children were still very young and we lived in the house where the school bus picked them up outside our door bright and early every day, I *really* wanted those kids to catch that bus. I did *not* want to take them to school in my pajamas again. Unfortunately, when I finally woke up, it was 8:30. “Oh, crap,” I thought—“not only have they missed the bus—they're gonna be *late!*” That meant I'd have to get out of the car and go into the school offices in my robe and pajamas to sign them in.

I rushed to their rooms. They weren't in their beds. (They were up!) Downstairs in the den, two empty little cereal bowls sat on the coffee table, but my children were gone. They had gotten themselves ready, had breakfast, and caught the bus without even waking me up!

I drove to both their schools that morning (Salley was at a separate primary school) before I went to Greenville, got them each out of class, combed their hair, and told them never to leave the house without telling me again. By the time they were in junior high, I had a serious reputation around town—no doubt embellished by my offspring.

But by 1986, suddenly it was *cool* to be a “woman in the workplace.” My sister Marty, by then a practicing attorney, even called me one morning—laughing—to tell me she'd seen a psychologist on *The Today Show* giving working mothers advice about child rearing. One of the TV psychologist's brilliant suggestions had been “Bathe the kids at night and dress them in the clean clothes they'll be wearing the next day—it saves time in the morning.” I made Marty *promise* to tell Mama what she'd just told me.

So now it was OK to be a working mother. There were after-school programs in the public schools and private childcare facilities for older kids; and daycare facilities for infants through preschoolers cropped up in office buildings as the workplace accommodated more female employees.

Just when I'd lost the last workplace I'd ever enter as an employee.

I was forty years old. It's no fun being ahead of your time.