

## CAREER

by Linda Talisman

*A chosen pursuit; a profession or occupation. The general course or progression of one's life. A rapid course or swift progression, as of the sun through the heavens. To move or run at full speed; go headlong; rush.*

In high school I kept a notebook full of doodles, poetry and story fragments. I wrote a sonnet about my favorite obsession, a boy named Mike. My English teacher said I was a writer, and should plan my adult life accordingly. I should start by taking AP English, which met at seven o'clock in the morning. No way was I going to school at seven o'clock in the morning. He said I should take the AP English test anyway, and should prepare for it by reading the introduction to *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. Not the literature itself, just the introduction and the annotations in the back. I passed the test and got six college credits in English, resulting in again not reading literature when I didn't take the two classes those credits represented.

I never planned to go to college until my senior year. That's when I realized if I didn't I would have to find a job, drive a car, and live in Los Angeles.

Even then, I only applied to one: the University of California at Santa Barbara. UCLA was too close to home, and Berkeley too far away. Most private colleges wanted a higher GPA than I had and required courses I hadn't taken. I didn't think about money. Despite our complete lack of savings, I assumed I could go to any college that accepted me, that it made no difference whether its tuition was public school modest or private school gargantuan, or whether it was in California so I could get a Cal Grant, or out of state so I couldn't.

Once at UCSB, I hated dorm life. I hated the food. I hated having a roommate. All my life my mother and I had loved Santa Barbara for vacations, but being there all the time depressed me. The climate was perfect. Every day. One's state of mind could never measure up. Most of my hall-mates were born-again Christians. I wanted to meet some Jewish kids, so I went to a Hillel meeting. Everyone there was from the Valley, it seemed, and they all said "What temple do your parents go to?" I had only one parent, and had never been to temple in my life. I never went back.

My sophomore year I transferred to Pomona College in Claremont, California, because my best friend from senior year went there, and they had nicer furniture in the dorms. Because I got straight A's my first quarter at UCSB, I now merited private school admission. Tuition-wise, I exchanged modest for gargantuan. My mom cosigned a lot of loans.

During the next three years, I took drawing, creative writing, and ceramics, but for some reason majored in art history and planned to become a professor. Someone said by the time I got my PhD, a whole generation of professors would be retiring, and there'd be plenty of jobs.

The year after graduation, I lived with my friend B. in the north end of Claremont, close to Mount Baldy. By night coyotes howled; tumbleweeds tumbled by day. Once we saw a giant possum outside the sliding glass doors.

B. biked to the bakery in downtown Claremont at dawn to prepare bread dough, while I wrangled toddlers at a daycare center in the mornings and coded data for an anthropologist in the afternoons. Our apartment was actually the back of someone's house, vacant since their teenage sons had left home.

I hated having a roommate. In this pairup, I was the neat one. The first and only time, ever. We fought over dishes, and the acceptable way to remove Romaine lettuce leaves from the head. It seems I tore them in the middle, instead of plucking whole leaves from the core, leaving an unacceptable bunch of torn halves for my roommate's salad.

I decided I wanted to be an anthropologist instead of an art historian, and applied to graduate schools for the following fall.

In September 1984, I came to New York, moved into my cousin's East Village apartment, and started graduate school at NYU.

At first I thought I wouldn't hate having a roommate anymore. My cousin had a great LP collection, made evening gowns out of Hefty bags, and jewelry out of Shrinky-Dinks. It was the eighties. I liked the styles. I liked the music. Sometimes we went to clubs.

Still, it was shared space, different habits. The universe went back to normal and I was the messy one. We fought about dishes, cleaning, space, and rights. Then, she told me she was moving out.

I didn't want another roommate, but I couldn't pay the rent by myself. I panicked and took a full time job at Pearl Paint.

I didn't exactly mean to drop out of NYU. I hadn't planned it. That last semester, I did seem to spend more time in the weight room at the Coles Sports and Recreation Center than I spent studying. And maybe graduate school hadn't been the same since the first time someone had asked me if I was an artist.

It happened during the graffiti art field trip for "Performance in Everyday Life," a class offered jointly by the Anthropology and Performance Studies departments.

It was the first time I ever met a working artist, let alone a famous one. His name was Lee. If you want to know more about him, just google keywords "lee" "graffiti" and "art".

I told him graffiti was my favorite topic in the class so far, and that I planned to write my paper about it.

"You're so interested in this," he said. "Are you an artist yourself?"

I took a breath to say no, but it never came out.

"Well?" he said.

I let out the breath, took another one, and said yes.

I began drawing again.

The artist in my life told me I should make my work to last; use permanent markers, artist quality colored pencils and pastels, acid-free paper. I asked him where he liked to buy art supplies, other than spray paint. "Pearl Paint," he said.

For the next five years I worked at four different art supply stores. My work was shown at Downtown Beirut on First Avenue, where I also worked briefly as a bartender.

I don't remember when I slowed down the painting and drawing, or when I started writing a novel. I joined the International Women's Writing Guild, and through them, a writer's group. I started some short fiction. My stories, though populated with vivid characters and interesting situations, never seemed to go anywhere. I'm not sure I ever finished one. My novel went through a first draft and part of a second without my ever knowing how it would end. I know I finished something, because in August of 1989 my poem "East Sixth Weekend" appeared in *The National Poetry Magazine of the Lower East Side*.

I replied to an ad for assistant manager at yet another art supply store. I was fired after six months, when the manager who hired me left, and another took over.

I was happy to be on unemployment, but had to prove I was looking for work. I decided to write every art supply store in town and tell them I was available. That would keep the folks at unemployment happy for awhile.

To my surprise one of my letters received a reply. The job it led to was a turning point. While there, I parted painfully from Lee, and met both my future husband and the next phase in my so-called career.

The job was administrative assistant to the commercial sales department. It involved using a Macintosh, and they didn't care that I had never used one before, or even seen one. To my surprise I fell in love with it and with all computers, and started making plans to buy one of my own.

In the fall of 1990, I left that fateful job to pursue word processing. Agencies kept sending me out for "administrative," which means answering the phone. I hate answering phones, even my own. To pad my tech resume, I volunteered as Membership Vice President of the NYC Chapter of the Association for Women in Computing. Stacy Horn, founder of the New York City message board Echo, spoke at an AWC meeting. She had an NYU master's degree in something called Interactive Telecommunications. Computers and communication, technology and telecom, all in Tisch School of the Arts. It sounded perfect for me. Undaunted by the astronomical tuition, I applied, and was accepted. I took deferred admission and spent a year reducing my debt, clearing the way for more student loans.

I found an agency that put me in a word processing center. At last, no more phones. The center's coffee room also served the adjoining computer operations center, where the servers lived. Occasionally a lone techie emerged from that mysterious abode, mug in hand. We shared Animaniacs jokes. He liked the books I was reading for a course on Local Area Networks. We became friends. A spot opened up on the weekend night shift, and I became an Off-Hour Computer Operations Analyst. So by the time I started at ITP in the summer of 1994, I already had a toenail in the door of the career in computer networks I'd said I wanted. Yet there I was I in art school, of a sort.

The trouble is, I don't like new media. Given a machine, I want to take it apart. Given an art project, I want a pencil.

My third semester at ITP, early in 1995, I took Stacy Horn's class "Exploring Electronic Networks." After dipping into text-based online environments such as MUD's (Multi-User Dungeons) and their next-of-kin MOO's (Multi User Object Oriented), I learned about the internet's emerging graphical face, the World Wide Web. I made my first web page, about Ada King, Countess of Lovelace.

From fellow students I learned to program interactive web pages using an interpreted language called Perl. I joined the World Wide Web Artists Consortium (WWWAC) mailing list.

1995 was Year of the Dot Com Bubble. Every company wanted a presence on the World Wide Web. Advertising agencies opened New Media divisions. New media companies appeared like worms on the sidewalk after a spring rain. One of these found me through the WWWWAC. They needed to expand their programming staff. He was tired.

So I became Number Two of Two, until Number One resigned, moving me up to One in search of a Two. Eventually they hired Two and Three, both recent grads in computer science, the field of programming for the web no longer the sole domain of students and amateurs.

Very cool, as sweatshops go. The twentysomethings who worked there didn't seem to mind not having a life outside of work.

I found out I was pregnant and started miscarrying on my thirty-fifth birthday, in the middle of the 1996 Olympics website project.

My priorities changed. My boyfriend and I (I think that's what I called him then, now he's "my husband") figured maybe we could have a baby on purpose. Then, in the fall, an impossible schedule for an ambitious project made me miss most of what would be the first World Series of a new Yankees winning dynasty. I'm still proud of my letter of resignation to the New Media Youth Ghetto Sweatshop.

I found a freelance job choosing and assembling computer equipment for a small accounting firm. Next, I was pregnant, this time for keeps.

My father, from whom I'd been estranged from the time I was four to the time I was thirty-four, died without relatives as far as any of his paperwork showed. The Bronx County Public Administrators Office found me through a card I'd sent him. It turned out he had a CD worth ninety-thousand dollars stashed away. I hired a lawyer and was appointed administrator of his estate, so I could get the money. Staying home for three years with my baby became a possibility.

She was born in October 1997. I was awarded my Master of Professional Studies degree from ITP in Spring of 1998. I paid twelve thousand dollars toward student loans,

and in 1999 founded TechnoFacture Project, a company providing web design classes for children, using the curriculum I'd developed as my master's thesis project.

This didn't work out for two reasons. Once I'd learned of the many pressures on upper middle-class school-age kids in New York City, I began to feel ambivalent about adding to them by marketing yet another after-school activity to their anxious, ambitious parents. Plus, I began suffering from bouts of depression.

Five lean years, several prescriptions, one tragic and economically crippling disaster, seven Monster.com search agents, and an uncounted number of resumes snail-mailed, e-mailed, faxed or carried into an unresponsive void later, I was desperate for a job. Any job.

I finally got one as secretary for a solo law practice in downtown Brooklyn.

The trouble with taking time off from your career to raise a child is that there's no guarantee it will still be there when you're ready to resume it.

But what was my career? What would resuming it look like? Whatever it was, after a year at my new job I was awash in angst over what on earth had happened to it.

Then I read *On Writing* by Stephen King. Writing. Yes, wasn't that it?

Write what you like to read, he said. Ideas appeared for science fiction and horror stories. I jotted them down in the notebook I now carried everywhere. I wrote my first horror story on a bench outside the children's swimming pool in Tompkins Square Park, while my daughter swam.

Writing and revising stories, researching markets, preparing manuscripts for e-mail or snail mail submission, sending them out, keeping track of where they've been. That's what I do now in the cracks of time between my job, figuring out what's for dinner,



listening to my daughter practice her trumpet, family trips to the video store, late night sci-fi ponderings with my husband, and the occasional game of Clue. Manuscripts and pens for revision are now as much a part of a trip to the laundry as dirty clothes and soap. My housekeeping attempts inspire some of my best horror ideas.

I still work at the law office. I still hate answering phones, but it seems fitting that I spend my days preparing documents beside an unending stream of characters, names and human situations.

I can't say I'm a success now, but I can say I'm a writer. It hasn't been a headlong career, or swift, or rational like the course of the sun through the heavens, but at last the general progression of my life makes sense, to me at least.