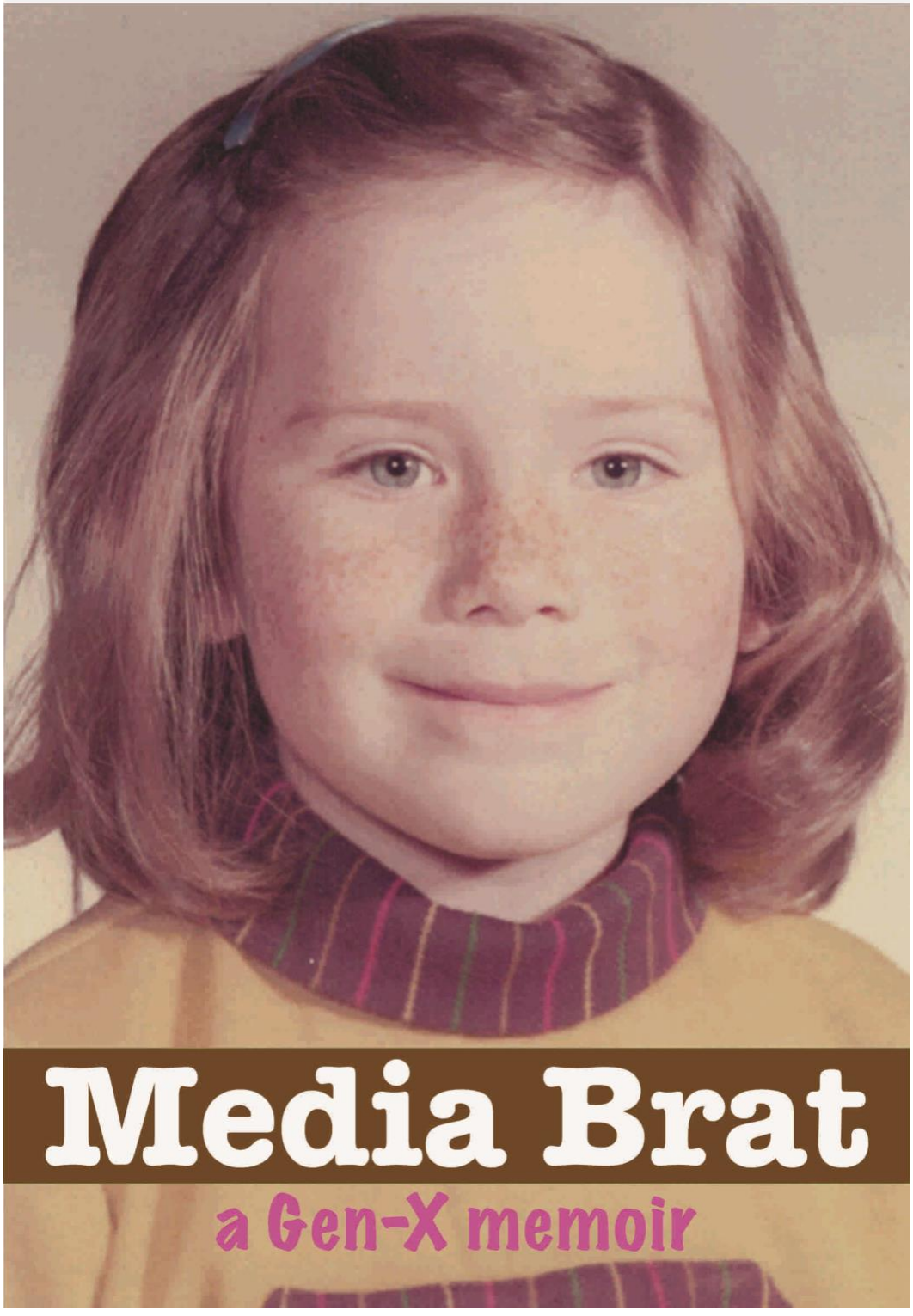
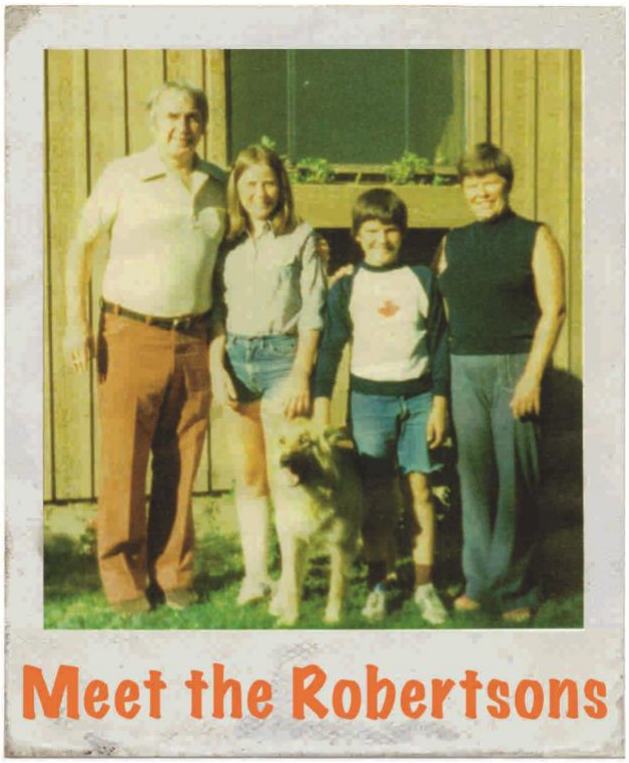
PATRICIA DAWN ROBERTSON



Media Brat

a Gen-X memoir

"When the wallpaper matches my bedspread, it's time to move to Dad's new job."



Meet the Robertsons

Sportswriter John Robertson's king-size ego and irrepressible talent took his family — wife Betty, daughter Patricia, son Timothy — on a crazy career ride: hometown Winnipeg to Toronto to Montréal to Florida to Houston to Barbados — and back again — from the early 1960s to the late 1980s during the media heyday of print, open-line radio and television news.

These are the authentic — and hilarious — coming-of-age stories of independent journalist Patricia Dawn Robertson, an 'embedded' participant-observer held captive as a child and young adult with her sports-loving parents and younger brother in professional sports stadiums, ballparks and ice rinks throughout North America. Many sports fanatics would have traded places in a heartbeat with the entitled media brat — who hated spectator sports yet loved her sportswriter father.

Meat Draw Books

**Memoir, Humour,
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1950s-1990s North American culture**

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Media Brat a Gen-X memoir

No One Wants to Sleep with the Sportswriter's Daughter

Dunedin, Florida Spring Training, Toronto, Summer 1985

I'm working at my summer job in the *Toronto Sun*'s business offices, one floor up from the newsroom, and I'm weary from dialling deadbeats to

collect $18 on old classified ads. To mix it up, I call to collect on bigger debts — display advertisers that have gone 120 days overdue. After awhile, I stray down to the newsroom to spy during my morning coffee break.

Valerie Gibson*, Toronto Sun* fashion editor, is busy working up a spread on the colour purple when I try to get her attention. "How about Back to the Fuchsia?" I quip as I walk past the fashion editor's desk with an unsolicited headline suggestion.

Valerie raises an eyebrow as if to say, "*And you are?"* I don't let her British indifference dissuade me. "How about Purple Reigns? Don't you just love Prince?"

No reply. I elect to keep moving and bound down the stairs to the cafeteria for a carrot muffin. Isn't this how newspaper people work their way up? You start off in one department and catapult from there to editor of your own section or a daily column. Maybe back in 1956 Winnipeg when my father broke into the business — but not in mid-1980s Toronto.

When the advice column job comes open, I make an appointment with Les Pyette, the Sun's managing editor. Les, to his infinite credit, agrees to meet with me. The first question out of his mouth is succinct: "Can you write like your father?"

Gulp. There's that dreadful question that still haunts me to this day.

"Nobody writes like my father, Les."

"Well, I have a candidate all lined up for that advice column job. I've been promising it to her for ages. My advice to you is to go back to school. Complete your studies. Then we'll see how you fare."

Who would expect a hard-bitten newsman to have a guidance counsellor side? "Thanks, Les. I really appreciate the advice." I then make my way back upstairs to the business offices to contemplate my next career move.

When my summer office job runs out and I refuse to depart graciously, the administration generously kicked me upstairs to the Canada Wide offices, the *Toronto Sun*'s publishing arm, to type address labels. My ham-fisted secretarial skills meant this difficult task took forever.

Every week, members of the Toronto Argonaut's Sunshine Girl cheerleading squad would arrive to pick up their fat paycheques. My boss had a poster of his favourite Sunshine Gal pinned on the beige wall over

his desk. The Sunshine Girls made more in one appearance fee than I did all week.

When I wasn't typing address labels, I took orders over the phone for playing cards. The *Toronto Sun* produced a very popular deck of cards adorned with Sunshine Girls. Area perverts with *Visa* cards called on lucky me to place their orders.

"Are there only four different girls or fifty-two?" they'd ask me. Argh. "Sixteen," I'd say. "Can I take your *Visa* number?" I lasted three weeks before I gave my notice. I only wish I'd saved a deck of cards as a souvenir.

Like a swallow to Capistrano, I soon continued with my fallback coat-checking gig at Tiffany's. Before I returned to school full-time in September 1986, every February while Dad covered the Blue Jays in Florida, I would add up my coat-check tips. Dad would buy me a one-way plane ticket to Florida and I'd stay on the pullout sofa in the *Toronto Sun* condo in Dunedin for a month. I rode back to Toronto with my folks in the back seat like I was still eight-years-old because my father never let anybody else get behind the wheel of his car.

It was an extended adolescence for a Gen-Xer. I didn't know what I wanted to do with my life and the rental market in Toronto was tight. I still lived at home and I remained part of John's entourage as long as the perks were dispensed. When Spring Training started up in February 1986, I was rewarded for my stint at the *Toronto Sun's* business offices with one last season with my folks. I chose Florida over late winter Toronto. The price of admission was mandatory attendance at the Grapefruit League's home games in Dunedin. So I brought a Jane Austen novel.

"Put that away," Betty scolds. "Here comes the president of Labatt. I want you into the game."

"He doesn't care," I groan.

"I do!" she replies.

Four rows beneath us in the front row is the Godfrey family. Paul Godfrey is the publisher of the *Toronto Sun* and his seats are better than ours since Dad is at work in the press box and we're smack dab in the middle of the *Toronto Sun* hierarchy.

The two Godfrey sons are better team players than I am. Although 'off-duty,' they're decked out in Blue Jays batboy uniforms in matching light

blue polyester. The boys look overheated as the Florida sun beats down on them and the afternoon game drags on.

Spring Training is the same scenario every year. It's like one long protracted try-out. Most rookie pitchers can't seem to strike out the opposing team. It's either a walk followed by another walk then a third walk with the bases loaded or else here comes a home run. Now I can look up from my book to take in that play. Then it's back to the drudgery.

Why didn't I bring a hat? Will Betty tolerate yet another mid-inning displacement so I can hit the concession-stand again? I realize that I'm poor company and that many superfans would give their eyeteeth for my seat. If I were a true rebel, I'd scalp my ticket in the parking lot and leave Betty to sit with a stranger while I took in an art show. But then I'd probably have to find another place to stay in Dunedin.

Baseball is just the backdrop. I'm here for the free condo, the tasty lunches at the Greek fishing village, the cheap consumer goods, book-ish sunscreen-clad afternoons by the pool and insider photography lessons from Stan Behal.

In February 1985, we shared the two-bedroom *Toronto Sun* condo with staff photographer Stan Behal and his girlfriend, Pauline, since the paper was cutting back on their travel budget. I slept on the pullout sofa while the couples took over the bedrooms. Mum would have preferred our own condo, which was usually the case, but everyone bunked-in together that year. After a few days of awkward co-habitation, we settled into a familiar routine.

John would arrive home from the ballpark, pick up the phone, and start arguing with sports editor George Gross back in Toronto about that day's coverage. While our blood sugar dipped, Mum and I waited impatiently to go out to Tarpon Springs for a late dinner. Stan and Pauline would stick their heads in the door, overhear the uproar, change then quickly head out to the bars, the beach or a humble fish shack while John kept up his constant vigil to set his own agenda.

It was the era of the *Sony Walkman* so if I wanted to I could tune out underneath a lone palm tree and listen to "Message in a Bottle" by The Police — until Dad emerged from the condo, car keys in hand and we finally got some dinner.

To keep myself busy between games, I bought a 35 mm camera. A *Pentax*. I was a novice with this costly new equipment so I bought a complicated, scientific manual that I never read. Stan and Pauline took me to the beach and showed me the ropes.

"Come in here," Stan whispers at me one day from his condo bedroom. I hesitate then join him in his room where he peels off ten boxes of free 35 mm film for me from his stash in the cupboard. "Thanks, Stan!" I beam. "Now don't load it in the daylight or you'll expose the film," he cautions me.

Stan was ambitious and hardworking and because of that he also took on the occasional Florida-based Sunshine Girls shoot. During Spring Training holidays, I ate my way out of Sunshine Girl contention. "When the girls have big thighs, I just shoot them coming out of the pool waist-high," Behal confesses to me one afternoon during a Sunshine Girls shoot.

That subversive tabloid strategy stuck with me while I carried around my new camera, read Nora Ephron's *Scribble, Scribble* and contemplated a possible career in journalism.

I soon found out that Ryerson College had a speed typing entrance requirement. "I told you to take typing in high school," Betty scolds me while I fumble haplessly with Dad's manual typewriter, a Swedish portable model, unable to achieve the minimum speed necessary for J-school. I decide to return to York University in Toronto a year later to undertake the Women's Studies program instead.

Pauline, Stan's impish girlfriend, is a full-time freelance journalist and she took me under her wing. Soon Pauline and I hit the local bars without Stan or my staid parents. I quickly find out that the night-time bar scene is the *real* spring training. One night Pauline took me out bar hopping and I witnessed the players carousing first-hand. Stan told Pauline where the players congregated to socialize so we had the inside scoop. That Dunedin bar was packed with players, fans and groupies.

It was the seedy side of the scene that my overprotective sportswriter father had deliberately sheltered me from with family restaurant outings and shopping excursions to *Nordstrom* department store instead. I figured that this must be what it's like on a regular season road trip as Pauline and

I lined up self-protectively against the wall and observed the players working the room.

While I hug the wall, a *Budweiser Lite* clenched in my hand, the players walk past us like they're reviewing the troops. One keen rookie pitcher tries to chat me up on his way past, stopping in front of me with a big smile. That's when The Super Mouth in me kicks in and I let him have it.

"Don't bother," I say with an evil grin. "I saw you pitch today. How many players did you walk? It was excruciating," I taunt him. The suddenly long-faced rookie turned on his heel in a huff to search for someone who will be more impressed with his stature.

That awful rookie pitcher walked batter after batter that afternoon and the game stretched out like a dull cocktail party. I was still crabby and sunburnt from extra time spent logged in mind-numbing frustration in the stands. We never left before a game was over so I was sentenced to watch this poor sod pitch his way back down to the minors while Betty kept score and John downed yet another coffee in the open-air press box behind us.

Pauline and I quickly shift our position to the bar where Damo Garcia, a second baseman from the Dominican Republic, starts to chat me up. After a few minutes of flirting, his teammate leans in and whispers to him: **"**Don't you know who *SHE* is? That's John Robertson's daughter!"

Damo looks at me with hostility. "Your father is a son of a *beeetch*," Damo snarls. "Get away from me, girlie."

"You had better steer clear of *me* then," I taunt Damo while I admire his aqua-line nose and Brylcreemed hair one last time.

Then I turn back to Pauline. "Are there any civilian men we can talk to here? Ever since left-fielder George Bell punched John in the nose in the Blue Jays locker room, the Dominican players have been kinda hostile."

Perfect. I've found the antidote to the players' cheesy come-ons. No one wants to sleep with the sportswriter's daughter. Damo leans over to another player and my cover is blown. For the rest of the evening, the horny players give me a wide berth so Pauline and I chat up a burly Toronto cameraman and a rep from *Adidas* instead.

While many women may dream of hooking up or marrying someone from the ranks of sport, I'm not impressed with 'the life.' It's because I know the hard truth. Professional athletes are never home, live in a fishbowl,

dedicate themselves completely to their sport, belong to a men-only clubhouse culture and many are traditional males with conservative expectations of their women.

A lot of the players like to screw around. This was true in Montréal in the 1970s when I was a child and the trend continued when I was a marriage-age adult on the fringes of the scene in the 1980s. The girlfriends of Toronto Blue Jays players had their own dedicated section at Exhibition Stadium in Toronto. It was far away from the section where the traditional wives sat with their offspring.

You could always spot the wives with their trim designer clothes, manicures, hair extensions, fur coats, sunglasses and wiggly spoiled toddlers in-tow. It was as if Jennifer Lopez had been cloned and made into the Barbie edition of The Player's Wife. The players' wives were also quite clannish since they huddled protectively and seemed to live and die for every play of every game.

Whenever their husband was at bat, a wife would lean forward as if her life depended on it. And, quite often it did. Chris Whitt, catcher Ernie Whitt's wife, used to call Ernie "her *investment*." She got it. For Chris, it was all business. To be a player's wife, you needed to be loyal, have undivided enthusiasm for the game and have a tolerance for the bloated egos that accompany the sport.

I just wasn't patient enough, keen enough or kind enough to be the woman behind the man in the polyester uniform, that guy in the sharp cleats who would rather toss a ball around with his catcher than take me to the movies.

As the sportswriter's daughter, I may not have made the team or married a team member but I was happy to occupy the objective role of the outsider looking in at them. This was back in the day when girls and women weren't admitted to the locker rooms. Female sportswriters were rare birds.

Sportswriter Alison Gordon from the *Toronto Star* expended as much energy being taken seriously as she did covering the games. My father, who also maligned Germaine Greer, didn't want women in the locker room or the press box.

It was no different, really, than Winnipeg's Beer & Skits tradition in the 1950s where Dad cut his teeth. The press club men would sooner don skirts

and wigs than include women in their annual satirical sketches that lampooned current events, politics and sports. They were entering *The Bridge on the River Kwai* territory where Alec Guinness' men gamely acted out both the male and female parts — conducted in drag — to the assembled prisoners of war to boost morale — while the inscrutable Japanese guards and commandant watched in cross-cultural horror.

When Gordon became the first woman writer assigned to the baseball beat, my father was outraged. He viewed her assignment as a sideshow. "What does that woman know about baseball? She's an interloper. A fan. Besides, she can't write."

In 1979, Gordon was awarded the National Newspaper Award for Sportswriting so that contradicted John's harsh assessment. How dare she earn the same professional awards as Dad had won in 1973. John was Old School. I never completely understood his dislike for female sportswriters since he always treated me, and my mother, with the utmost respect. But then I never asked to go into the locker room. Nor did I express any interest in following him into sport.

Most journas, Alison Gordon among them, would have — and did jump — at the opportunity. Not me. I had already logged hundreds of hours impatiently waiting in dull parking lots, leaning against our blue Chrysler New Yorker, while John put the finishing touches on his game story. If I never saw another baseball game, that was just fine with me.

John was very adept at writing about baseball and he was equally talented at dispatching with his detractors. When he was still on staff at the *Toronto Sun*, before defecting to the *Toronto Star* for way more money, he received a crazy letter from Lubor Zink, the fascist *Sun* columnist.

Dad, who was a bit of a cheeky devil, called Lubor up on the phone. "Lubor, some crazy asshole is writing to me under your name." The line went quiet. Dad knew that he had just given Zink a graceful exit. Lubor Zink confined himself to political commentary and current events. If Zink had been a fellow sportswriter, John would have responded in print like he did with Jim Proudfoot.

Dad was 'traded' in September 1986 to the *Toronto Star* from the *Toronto Sun* for *The Star's* baseball writer, Wayne Parrish, who assumed

the sports editor's job at *The Sun* while Dad now covered the Blue Jays for Canada's largest circulation daily.

It was an awkward transition. John spent four years competing with *The Star's* sport department and now he was on the same team. Sports columnist Jim Proudfoot made a regular point of disagreeing with John, in print — a tactic that irked my father.

Why not find your own subject matter instead of reacting to Robertson? But that was the impact Dad often had on other people. His controversial opinions raised hackles and frequently demanded a response. Dad would gage the success of his columns according to the strong reactions they received. Yet sometimes he'd be wounded by the public debate with his fellow writers.

The newspaper business in the late 1980s had become less collegial and more confrontational. It used to be that the enemy was the competing newspaper. Proudfoot, who was jealous of my father for commanding a larger salary, decided to shoot inward. It was like Dad was still competing from the sports department at the *Toronto Sun*, not sharing a newsroom at the *Toronto Star*.

In John's Winnipeg days, the writers retreated to the Press Club, *en masse*, to hash over their experiences and share a laugh over a tankard of draft beer on-tap. Soon after joining the *Toronto Star*, Dad started to work from home. He just couldn't stomach the newsroom politics. The other staffers and their opinions proved too distracting. It was a bonus for his now-grown children since it meant we had more face-time with our workaholic father.

Every weekday morning at 7 a.m., Dad would stumble downstairs and do a commentary straight from his desk. The Toronto radio station that he freelanced for had a live mic wired into our home so Dad could pontificate to their listeners on the sport news of the day.

It was quite a sight to witness him, still in a t-shirt and boxer shorts, clutching an overfilled cup of *Taster's Choice* in one hand and a script in the other. He looked just like Oscar Madison, the slovenly sportswriter in *The Odd Couple*.

Our living room was littered with newspapers and magazines. We had a subscription to the *Toronto Star* and the *Toronto Sun* had a box on our

block. It was my job to tidy up the accumulation for the recycling every week. Over breakfast, I went straight for the Entertainment and Lifestyle sections while the rest of my family competed to read the Sports pages. Betty always flipped to John's column and game stories first so they could discuss his coverage. Soon after the newspapers were circulated, our phone would start to ring off the hook with people reacting to John Robertson. Betty's job was to screen the calls from her perch beside the kitchen wall phone.

If John was on deadline, only interview subjects were put through. He used every trick in the book to get a quote from evasive subjects. When Pat Gillick, Blue Jays GM, wasn't returning his calls, John pretended to be Peter Hardy (the Labatt umbrella man in Florida) and was immediately put through. It worked. He had Gillick cornered. "I had no choice," said Dad. "I was on deadline."

When Dad worked from home during his *Toronto Star* days, he'd answer the phone himself and share industry gossip, mentor up-and-comers or just shoot the shit with his business contacts. He never really took a day off since he lived and breathed his job.

"The day I saw Expo Bill Stoneman pitch a no-hitter in 1969, the first of two while he was with the team, was the day I realized I could never justifiably miss a game. What if I'd taken a holiday that day? This is not a profession where you take down time. At least not during the regular season."

Dad worked his beat with the same intensity, day after day, as if it was his rookie season. He was always determined to be the best, get all of the scoops and beat the competition. When he was really proud of a piece, he'd say to me: "I want it to land on my competitor's doorstep...take that!"

And it did. Dad won two Dunlop Awards for best columnist while he worked for owner Doug Creighton at the *Toronto Sun*. He loved getting that recognition since the tabloid paper didn't pay very well.

When Dad moved over to work for the broadsheet *Toronto Star,* it wasn't the money that prompted his decision. It was being overlooked for the Sports editor's position when George Gross, *Toronto Sun* sports editor, retired. When *The Star's* Wayne Parrish was hired for the job, John

promptly booked a lunch with Gary Lautens, *The Star's* humour columnist and an old friend, to inquire about joining his paper.

John and "The Baron," as Dad called Gross, were frequently at odds. Gross called John "The Prima Donna." In Gross' defence, Dad wasn't really management material. John's strength was his writing and reporting on his beat but his sizeable ego was bruised.

So Dad left his cherished colleagues and jumped ship. There was a signing bonus. And *The Star* paid triple the annual salary of the *Toronto Sun*. The *Toronto Star* had stolen their best sportswriter and Dad had willingly defected from the tight-knit *Sun* family. How dare he? Hadn't Doug Creighton hired John after a failed provincial election bid punctuated by a debilitating stroke?

At this stage, Creighton was less and less involved in the daily operations of the Sun Media Group and Dad was unwilling to sit down with Paul Godfrey, publisher of the *Toronto Sun,* to negotiate.

John's mind was made up: he was going to write for the biggest daily in Toronto and leave behind his working-class readership at *The Sun*. The *Toronto Star* offered up a whole new audience. Like British newspaper readers, Toronto print readers were highly segregated in their choice of newspapers.

To his delight, John *did* find a whole new audience. The massive white canvas mailbags arrived weekly at our home, bulging with fan letters. The column was a big hit with *Star* readers and John enjoyed a supportive editor and managing editor. And he had good money rolling in each month to cover the Blue Jays, his dream job. His sentimental attachment to *The Sun* soon faded.

This was business, after all, and money was as good a measurement as any for success. Besides, I think Dad wanted to punish George Gross for passing him over and tormenting him all of those years. The enmity was mutual.

Those egocentric sportswriters were worse than backstage beauty contestants: clinging to petty rivalries, gatekeeping, tormenting, name-calling and backstabbing. The drama was clearly not confined to the playing field.

John had come a long way from his copy boy days at the *Winnipeg Free Press*. "When I was covering minor baseball, the publisher was so thrifty he'd get out a map to the ballpark to show me the quickest route so I'd save on my gas allowance," Dad once told me.

Publishers were always cheap sons of bitches in his eyes but *The Star* was the exception. They really did follow their Atkinson principles of fair labour practices and integrity so John Robertson the circulation-boosting sportswriter was thrilled to join their newsroom.

That September, the same month that my father joined the *Toronto Star*, I returned to York University to complete my studies. I never visited Dad at his new *Toronto Star* offices during the four years that he worked with the paper but he was mostly working from home anyway where I still lived.

The bigger paper was more corporate and far less inviting than the eccentric *Sun* family. The dreary *Star* newsroom just didn't evoke the same collegiality, or dynamism, as *The Little Paper That Grew*.

Compared to the staid Star, the Sun's publicity tactics were legendary. Back in the early 1980s, after Dad settled in and established a rabid readership with his baseball coverage, the promotional arm of the *Toronto Sun* staged a reader's contest with John as the reward — or the equivalent in cash.

When John was tagged to take a winning stranger to the World Series and share a lunch, we knew he'd squirm at the prospect of lunch with an *actual* reader.

After all, his disdain for Tely readers back in 1966 prompted him to get fired for his insurrection.

My father dreaded those kinds of Benny Hill-esque PR stunts dreamed up by the *Toronto Sun's* publicity puppet masters. As a seasoned journalist, Dad distrusted PR hacks and their staged antics since he felt it undermined his credibility.

When a name was finally drawn, a photo of the contest winner appeared in the *Toronto Sun* with the lucky man shaking hands with a clearly uncomfortable John.

Comedian John Candy, who was boarding the same New York-originating flight home to Toronto with my father, had read that day's paper.

"I saw that guy who won the lunch with John Robertson at the World Series contest. You were backed up so far away from him that your arm was outstretched as far as it would reach," Candy wisecracked. "He took the money, didn't he, John?"

My father knew Candy was spot-on with his observation. "Yes, John," Dad laughed with an obvious sense of relief, "he took the money."

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