

REMEMBERING TIMMIE

Her name was Anne Hutchison, but for reasons I never knew she was always called Timmie. She must have been around 40 when I first met her in the newsroom of the Baltimore Sun, where I was starting my first newspaper job as a brand-new 21-year-old police reporter. Hard as it is to believe nowadays, there were hardly any women there or in any other American newsroom in 1962. As far as I remember, beside Timmie there was only one other woman on the news staff, plus a couple of others who worked on what was then still called the women's page. I believe Timmie had come to the Sun sometime during World War II, when the paper reluctantly hired a few women because so many men were away in the service.

Timmie was tall and slim, with a patrician New England, martini-drinking look. She must have been a knockout when she was younger, and she was still quite beautiful despite always looking tired and worried. Especially worried. She worked on the rewrite desk, where her job was to take notes over the phone from the police reporters and turn them into stories of murders, holdups, fires, accidents, and whatever other untoward events had occurred that day in the streets of Baltimore or in the surrounding counties.

The reporters described her job somewhat differently. As we saw it, she came to work every day to drive us crazy. Whether this was the only reason for her careworn look or if she worried about other things too I don't know, but on the job, Timmie lived in a chronic state of dread. She was perpetually haunted by the fear that when she came to write a story – even the most routine two-paragraph report on a minor crime – she would need a fact and wouldn't have it, or that she would misunderstand and get something wrong because she hadn't gotten every possible detail.

Her solution was to demand every scrap of information she could dream up to ask about, however trivial or extraneous. If you told Timmie that someone had been shot and taken to the hospital, she wanted to know where the victim was wounded. If you didn't know, you had to call the hospital and find out. If you called back and said the guy was shot in the leg, Timmie would ask which leg – and if you'd neglected to find that out, you'd have to call the hospital yet again. And you couldn't just tell her the facts; you had to explain them. Exhaustively. I once spent what seemed like an hour on the phone telling Timmie why the weapon some citizen had used to gun his wife or girlfriend or some other victim was properly called a .410 shotgun (with the decimal point), not a 410 gauge.

I can't imagine why I knew such an arcane fact – I was a city kid who to the best of my recollection had never had a shotgun in my hands – but it so happened I did know that a shotgun gauge is calculated by how many lead spheres with the same diameter as the gunbarrel will weigh exactly one pound (that's why a 12 gauge is bigger than a 20 gauge, if you work it out). A .410 shotgun, though, is for some reason denominated by a caliber – thousandths of an inch – instead of a gauge like most other shotguns. Anybody else on the rewrite desk might have just accepted that I knew what to call the thing, but not Timmie. Before she would let me off the phone I had to explain, in full.

We loved her, or most of us did, but she could be maddening. Late one night, Timmie noticed that our reporter on a big front-page murder story had said the police found a tennis shoe at the scene, but the afternoon newspaper had called it a sneaker (or maybe it was the other way around). Timmie phoned the reporter at 1 in the morning, waking him up, to ask if there was any difference. According to office legend, the reporter replied: "Yes, Timmie, there is a difference. A tennis shoe is what I wear when I play tennis, and a sneaker, goddamn it, is what I'm going to wear when I sneak up behind you and break your neck!"

The paper was strict about attribution. The high-minded reason is that the reader has a right to know where information comes from. The less noble reason is self-protection: if a piece of information is wrong, but you've quoted somebody, it's their mistake, not yours. For both those reasons, though probably the second more than the first, Timmie demanded a source for everything. The Sun's veteran police reporter, a Front Page archetype named Bill Morrissey, told about calling Timmie one night from a pay phone a couple of blocks from a big fire (no cell phones in those days). As he went through his notes, he mentioned that firefighters had pumped so much water on the blaze that the surrounding streets were under four inches of water. At that, he heard Timmie's typewriter stop clacking – the sign that a question was coming. After a pause, Timmie asked in her customary anxious voice, "Bill, about the water in the street – can we get someone to say that?" "Timmie," Bill replied in exasperation, "I'm standing in it!"

In my months as a beginning police reporter, whenever I called in a story and happened to get Timmie on the phone, it became a game. If I could answer all her questions, no matter how unexpected or far-fetched, I won. If I had to call back the cops or a witness or the hospital emergency room to get some additional detail, I lost. More than fifty years later, I can still feel the warmth of satisfaction that came when I got off the phone a winner. When I lost, I was sometimes annoyed at Timmie but more annoyed at myself. Even when I thought she was being unreasonable, I knew, even then, that she was making me a reporter.

The next part of Timmie's story happened after I left the newsroom and was working either overseas or in Washington, so I can't vouch for every detail. But the way I heard it was this: to the astonishment of all her colleagues, Timmie announced one day that she was quitting to get married. Her fiancé was the headmaster of an exclusive private school in New England somewhere, the sort of place where it seemed Timmie's aristocratic looks and manner would be far more congruous than in our scuffed, shabby newsroom. Timmie duly said her goodbyes, cleaned out her desk and left for her new life. But not too long afterward she reappeared in Baltimore and asked for her job back, explaining that the marriage was off. It was unexpected but not entirely surprising. For many years she gave the impression of being married to the Sun, and it was easy to believe that at the last minute, she just couldn't face being away from the paper.

But the Sun wouldn't take her back. In those days the paper had a strict policy against rehiring anyone who had left, and besides, though this may have been just an excuse, the editor told people the company doctor had advised against letting Timmie return. She was too nervous

and the stress would kill her, the doctor was supposed to have said. Timmie was devastated. Eventually she got a job as a reporter for the local Hearst paper, but she hated working there and as far as I know never stopped desperately missing her job at the Sun. Only a few years later, she died, still quite young. Whatever it said on her death certificate, it was hard not to think the Sun had broken her heart.

In the years I knew her, I never heard Timmie say anything about her family. Maybe it was just New England reserve, but I had the impression that she really was pretty much alone in the world. Her family was the newsroom, or so it seemed. I don't know who else remembers her now, but I think about Timmie fairly often. She comes into my mind sometimes when I hear myself asking – or teaching others to ask – the equivalent of "which leg was it?" I also remember her when I read a newspaper and see a story that is missing some key detail, or where a reporter has said something he couldn't possibly report from his own knowledge (he wasn't standing in the water, so to speak) but doesn't give a source. I imagine there are others out there among my former colleagues who also think of Timmie when they see careless, sloppy journalism – and who remember her with gratitude, as I do, for teaching us, all those years ago, how a good reporter does the job.

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