

Word Count: 3,332

How I Got To Casablanca

A slim bronze plaque on the desk told me my interrogator's name: Cornelius T. Alexander, Department Manager.

The interviewer looked down at my resume then back up. "Roxanne Marie Blake. I see you're a college grad, major in French, minor in English. Smart. Just the kind of girl we need to staff Find-a-Job Employment Agency." He smiled and looked me straight in the eye before his gaze drifted from my dark hair—swept up and sprayed—down to my blue plaid mini-skirt, which revealed far too much thigh.

Knees tighter together, I tried to pull down my skirt without calling attention to my nervousness. The skirt wouldn't budge.

Returning my focus to Cornelius Alexander, I noticed his pudgy hands, which at this minute held my job fate. A gold band bit into the abundant flesh on his ring finger.

"Roxie, your resume indicates that you graduated in 1971. What have you been doing for the past year?"

I stiffened. Mom always insisted that I be addressed as *Roxanne*. "*Roxie* sounds like a *floozy*," she would say.

I stopped gritting my teeth to answer, "Taking care of my mother."

Mr. Alexander cleared his throat and leaned across the desk.

"Roxie, my dear, it looks like you need a job. I think we can fix that."

With tears welling up, I nodded, afraid to speak.

“Now there’s some paper work to take care of, but first I’d like to ask you a question.”

He pursed his lips and cocked his head. “Up near Mt. Hood, I have a beautiful little cabin. Nice spot for hiking and relaxing. Maybe you can join me this weekend.” He grinned, eyes flashing.

I froze.

When I realized that his proposition required an answer, indignation boiled over. I stood, pulled my skirt down as far as possible, and walked toward the door in my business-like, two-inch heels.

A glance over my shoulder revealed that he was leering at my legs.

“My mother always said, ‘There’s no fool like an old, fat, *cheating* fool.’ Good-bye, Corny.”

I didn’t cry until I turned the corner and started the trek back to my apartment.

There really ought to be a law. Big shots with bad behavior.

I sighed. I really didn’t want to work there anyway. But what next?

Once I had wanted to become a high school teacher—French and English—but California law requires teachers to complete a fifth year, two semesters of education classes after the baccalaureate. Those plans derailed with of my mother’s illness. Certainly I have no regret taking time off to care for her. I moved back into the family home in San Francisco to drive her to the clinic, administer her medications, and coax her to eat. We watched old movies on TV, and she told me family stories—sad, funny and curious—that might otherwise have been lost to me.

My heart ached as I watched her change from an attractive 45-year-old widow to a skeleton. When she died, I was desperately alone. To settle up the enormous debts one malignant tumor caused, I had to sell the house I was raised in. The finality of that sale underscored my mother’s death. There was no one to advise me on the best way to proceed. I had been set adrift.

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After a month of wandering the hills of San Francisco, sitting at the beach, staring at the cold, gray sea, and becoming more miserable by the day, I set out for Salem, Oregon. It was where my grandparents had lived, the place I remembered having the best times as a kid. I thought it would be home.

Now as I walked through downtown Salem, I realized that moving here had been a major mistake. I couldn't sit beside the fire in my grandparents' kitchen, or ride a horse through the pasture, as I had done when I was young. After my grandmother's death, Mom inherited the farm but had to sell it early in her illness to cover expenses.

A knot formed in my stomach.

Salem, the state capital, is drowning in government. As a child, I hadn't noticed. As a student at UC Berkeley in the tumultuous 1960s, I marched on the front lines in many anti-government protests. Federal and state buildings loomed over me now, and I felt uneasy.

Gray flannel suits crowded the sidewalks. Lost in thought, I dodged briefcases and tried to decide on a new plan. Without warning, raindrops sprinkled my hair. *Oregon! Why did I leave California?* I ran the rest of the way to my apartment.

As I stepped through the outer door of the Victorian, my nostrils caught a tantalizing aroma wafting through the entry from Francine's apartment. I knocked on my landlady's door, and Francine appeared, her chocolate brown skin, short, round frame, and gold-toothed grin a comforting sight.

"How'd it go?" One look at my face and she waved me inside. "Have a seat and tell me all about it, child." She stood by the stove, stirring a pot of beef stew, silver earrings glittering in the artificial light.

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“Any luck?”

I shook my head and dropped into a chair at the kitchen table.

“Roxie, what happened?”

Somehow I didn't mind that Francine called me *Roxie*.

When I told her about Cornelius Alexander, her face hardened and I thought I saw steam coming from her ears. By the time I finished, she offered me a towel to dry my tears and a glass of water for the hiccups the tears had brought.

Francine patted my shoulder, set a cup of beef stew in front of me, and took a seat. “Now honey, God don't give us more trials than we can bear. He will provide. Let's pray about this.” And she took my pale hands in her large, dark ones and closed her eyes.

“Lord, look down on this here child today. She been looking for work and she need some help. Remember us here in this house. And lead Miss Roxie to the right job. Thank you, Lord Jesus. Amen.”

I kept my eyes closed during the prayer but looked up now. Francine's head was still bowed, and I admired her steel-gray Afro and the strength of her broad shoulders that surely had borne more burdens than I ever had.

Her grip tightened.

When she lifted her eyes, she looked right at me. “The Lord, He have somethin' better for you. So, Roxie, don't you fret none.”

Although I am not a churchgoer, not a true believer, I found a measure of hope in her words.

I met Francine when I responded to a note she had pinned to the bulletin board at the corner Laundromat. The apartment she advertised was cheaper than any listed in the local newspaper—sixty-five dollars a month in downtown Salem. The cost of rent grew increasingly important as I watched my bank balance dissolve.

Maybe God did have a hand in my finding this place.

Francine ran her fading Victorian as a house for wayward girls. Chopped into apartments of irregular shapes and sizes, the building rarely had vacancies. Of the five young women currently living here, I was the only one not on welfare, trying to finish a high school diploma, or on parole. It was my good fortune that she had needed to get that last room rented to meet basic expenses.

The rent was cheap; the advice was free. Her house rules were easy for me to follow, but not for some of the other tenants: No smoking. No alcohol. No drugs. No men.

“Thanks, Francine.” I rose and headed for my one-room studio in the attic. A kitchenette in one corner, a pull-down bed on the opposite wall, a rickety wing-backed chair, and a chest of drawers comprised my living space. Across the hall was the bathroom I shared with Gloria, a sixteen-year-old black girl who had recently become a mother. She lived in the other half of the attic.

I tiptoed up the stairs. Gloria sometimes had her baby with her, but he usually stayed with his grandmother during the day while Gloria worked on her GED.

I sagged into the chair and blew out a breath.

My mother’s photo smiled down from the top of the dresser—a beautiful young woman full of enthusiasm and promise. The glint in her eye said, “I’m here world, ready or not.” She had

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wanted to go to college but didn't. I never discovered why. She did all right for herself, though, by starting a dress designing business for socialites in San Francisco.

"God helps those who try, try again," my mother often said. "Try what?" I whispered.

Brushing tears away, I reviewed my job search. Over-qualified at the coffee shop. Too old at Burger Barn. Piggly Wiggly wanted someone (a man) with a degree in accounting. I went through my interview with Cornelius Alexander again and grimaced.

What's my next move? I had an appointment at one of the federal buildings the next morning but didn't hold out much hope. How could I work for the government?

But at this point, a job was a job.

I reached for the bankbook in the dresser drawer and opened it to the bottom line—a total of \$128.17. I shut my eyes and mumbled a tiny prayer. "God, if you're there, help me. Please."

When I smelled cigarette smoke drifting through the partially open dormer window, I crawled out to join Gloria on the roof.

"Hey, Gloria, Francine's gonna catch you smoking one of these days, and you'll be out on your butt." My usual greeting to her.

"Not if you don't tell her. And that's *Princess Gloria the Glorious* to you, Miss Bony White Ass." Her usual response.

We squatted together in silence for several minutes looking at the sky. It had cleared up since my afternoon of job hunting.

"How's the baby?"

Rodney had a cold but was growing strong. "Fifteen pounds already." She grinned.

"Hey. Not bad."

“You find a job yet?”

I groaned and gave her an abbreviated account of my day.

“You shoulda kicked him where it hurt the most.” She waved her cigarette in my direction

“No money for karate lessons this month.”

Gloria laughed, but she probably figured I was born with a diamond bracelet on my wrist and could pull it out whenever I *really* needed it.

When my legs began to cramp, I crawled back through the window and took stock of my clothes. I laid out my last clean underwear, and as Kris Krisofferson sang in “Sunday Morning Comin’ Down,” I found my “cleanest dirty shirt.”

Worry gnawed at me most of the night. The last time I checked the wind-up alarm clock, it was 2:15. I had to be up by 6:30 in order to shower, dress, gulp a cup of coffee and walk to the Federal Building for the exam at 8:00.

I made it with three minutes to spare.

The general aptitude test, given to all potential Civil Service employees, was held in a large, cold and crowded auditorium, buzzing with low-pitched voices. It was a testament to the times—slow economy and desperation to find work. Each of us sat at a school desk and received some forms and a pencil. We didn’t get the test questions until the two men in charge had gone over the rules, warnings, and requests. I tried to pay attention. This might mean a job.

The monitor called time two hours later. He told us to take a break and report back at 10:45. At the delicatessen on the corner, I bought an apple and a cup of coffee and spent the recess walking the neighborhood. When I returned to the auditorium, the tall, bald man read a short list of names and asked those applicants to follow him. My name was on the list.

Trailing after him, I wondered how many times he had been called *Baldy*.

He led us across the corridor, and we crowded into a small room without chairs. I looked around at the other four hopefuls—a man in a dark suit and a military-style crew cut, a woman in a green dress. She looked to be in her forties. A boy with dark, curly hair that brushed his shirt collar, and a young, blonde woman in a pink mini-skirt. She appeared to be about my age.

Baldy cleared his throat. “You five received the highest scores on the test this morning. After you pass a typing test, I think we can offer you jobs today.”

My heart sank.

In college, my typing teacher embarrassed me by asking how I could possibly make so many mistakes. “You look so good at the typewriter.”

Now I lifted my hands to heaven in defeat and let out a sigh, ignoring the startled looks from the other applicants, who apparently could type. I marched down the concrete steps with new false purpose and never looked back.

Raindrops began to fall before I reached the corner. I pulled a plastic rain hat from my purse and tied it under my chin. After buttoning my full-length coat from neckline to hem, I stuffed my hands into my pockets and strode down the street, as if I had a job, money in the bank, and could buy any fancy umbrella I wanted.

Two blocks from Francine’s stood a used bookstore. Today might be a good day to browse.

A former garage, the shop identified itself with a hand-painted wooden sign: Rainbow Books and Bargains. I removed my plastic rain hat and shook out the water before entering. A stout, dark-haired woman wearing granny glasses stood behind a cash register displaying “No

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Sale.” I judged her to be about thirty. Multi-colored bracelets ran up her arms to her elbows, and the sweet aroma of incense engulfed her and spread throughout the room.

“Peace, Sister. I’m Rainbow. If you need help, just ask.” She waved and her bracelets jingled.

An escapee from the Haight-Ashbury.

The place looked like a church rummage sale. Overflowing bookcases occupied one entire wall. Books lay in piles on the floor, on small tables, and on top of other books. Gunter Grass’ *Tin Drum*. Herman Hesse’s *Siddhartha*. *Catcher in the Rye*. *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

Shelves covered the opposite wall. Occupying space at one end was a stack of record albums—an eclectic array including Janis Joplin, the Beatles, Frank Sinatra, Elvis Presley and Patsy Cline. Farther down the shelf, candles stood in tall bronze holders. Jewelry, both new and used; incense; paper streamers. Two tarnished brass bells gathered dust in the corner. On the wall behind the cash register, posters stared back at me. The Beatles crossing the street. Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman in *Casablanca*. And there she was: Golda Meir, the gray-haired, granite-faced Prime Minister of Israel. Below the photo, in bold print, I saw the line I wished I had known about that morning: “But can she type?”

I bargained with Rainbow and got the poster for \$1.50.

On the walk home, I stopped by the Laundromat to read the notices posted on the cork board. I scanned the messy display of papers, trying to find something to earn a little money.

“Experienced baby sitter? Must work with children of all ages.”

Not for me. I needed time to grow up myself.

“Wanted: Companion for disabled elderly woman. Live in.”

I had just spent a year caring for my dying mother.

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“Typist wanted for small office downtown.”

Never!

“Housekeeper wanted. 20/hours/week. Flexible. Minimum wage: \$1.80/hour.”

I stared at that phone number before tearing it from the board and stuffing it in my bag.

Mother’s voice rang in my head: “Cleanliness lives next door to success.”

The next morning at 10:00, I knocked on the door of Mrs. Coopersmith’s 1920s style bungalow. A short, attractive woman in her mid-thirties swung the door open.

“Mrs. Coopersmith?”

“You must be Roxanne Blake. Come in.” Her smile warmed me and I relaxed. She extended her hand; I accepted and returned the smile.

“Twenty hours a week. Good for me because I have young children. You’re a student, aren’t you?”

“Yes.” I lied, sensing she wanted a student.

“Good. You can work around your class schedule.”

A board game with pieces scattered in the corner, a big rubber ball on top of the coffee table, and a red tricycle beside the sofa presented evidence of children living in the house.

My new employer motioned me to follow her. Before we had crossed the living room, she stopped and turned around to me.

“You’ll start in the kitchen today.”

I had plenty of kitchen experience. My mother taught me to cook and clean, skills that would ensure my value on the marriage market.

At the kitchen door, Mrs. Coopersmith gestured broadly with her hands. My eyes took in the room, and I swallowed a gasp. Dirty dishes overflowed the sink, reached high in stacks on the counter top, decorated the stove, and completely covered the large table in the corner. Dishes were also piled on the floor. I bit my lower lip and sucked in a breath, remembering another of my mother's pearls: "Beggars can't ask for a banquet."

Mrs. Coopersmith handed me an apron and retreated. After momentary paralysis, I shook myself, tied on the apron, rolled up my sleeves, and began emptying the sink.

How many sets of dishes does this woman have? I opened the cabinets to bare shelves.

Eight sets of dinnerware were spread all over the kitchen. On the blue ones, they had eaten spaghetti—at least a week ago. The white with yellow trim sported fossilized eggs, and there was something unrecognizable stuck to the beige with large green flowers.

I groaned and filled the sink with hot water and detergent.

Scrubbing and swearing, I imagined myself elsewhere.

"We'll always have Paris,"—lovely words from the movie *Casablanca*. Paris! Wouldn't *that* be fun?

Hours later, I sat down for a break. My hands looked like white prunes, and my arms ached from repeated up and down scrubbing motions. But when I looked around, I felt a rise of that elusive satisfaction from having done a good job.

It was time to return to work when I heard Mrs. Coopersmith in the living room playing the piano. I scraped and scoured and tried to ignore her off-key renditions. She screeched and changed pitch in the middle of notes. Realizing she was trying to sing to Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, I sought relief and switched on the portable radio above the stove.

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It was there in Mrs. Coopersmith's kitchen that my life took a dramatic turn. And when I look back now, I am grateful for Mrs. C. and her shoddy housekeeping.

I refilled the sink with hot water and suds, ready to attack a large pot with beans burned to the bottom.

“Peace Corps recruiters will be in Portland.”

My ears caught the words. I turned the water off and the volume up.

“You must have a college degree and a spirit of adventure. The Peace Corps is currently interested in young people who speak French for a two-year term of service in Morocco. That address again is Central Plaza, Suite 102 in Portland. Peace Corps. The toughest job you'll ever love.”

Staring at the suds, I clutched at an emerging idea. *There's nothing holding me here. But it's a government job! Oh irony, thy name is Roxanne.*

Sucking in my courage, I picked up the scouring pad and battled those dishes with fresh determination. I finished my six-hour shift and gratefully accepted payment--\$10.80 in nickels and dimes.

Early the next morning, I set out on the first leg of my journey to Casablanca. I counted telephone poles and Chevrolets as the bus sped along the freeway to Portland. And my mother's voice whispered in my ear: “Take the back roads. The scenery is always more interesting.”