Rite of Passage

I’ve been working at this big Silicon Valley modem company for two and a half years—since June, 1982. I’d started out as the administrative assistant to one of the five vice presidents, who’d founded this company. I’d met him through, of all things, the California Bach Society, known to its members as CBS. As president of the larger of the two CBS choirs, I was on its executive board; he was chair, as well as its major funder, or, as they say in show business, angel. I’d been looking for an escape from my dead-end admin job at a small tech outpost, where my boss had just been fired. This guy, the CBS board president, needed a secretary; I told him, “Call it administrative assistant and I’m in.”

As his admin I have very little to do, and with his blessing I work on the printed programs for CBS concerts in Davies Symphony Hall in San Francisco, which he is funding. Then, in 1983, he taps me to be on a six-member task force investigating the revolutionary new “personal computers.” The company, which basically owns the modem business for big data outfits, is considering getting into the PC market.

When we plunge into that market a few months later, my boss the VP/founder puts me in charge of the compatibility lab, along with a nice guy from manufacturing. We test how our PC modem and its software work on various personal computers: IBM, HP, DEC, others. I also test how our modem works with other PC modem software, and how our software runs on other PC modems.

Even better, I write the first manuals for the modem and its software. I figure that the audience for the install guide is a secretary with a flat-blade screwdriver, who will also be the one using the software manual. As the user’s advocate I work with the contractor creating the software to keep its little menus consistent. I even suggest a name for this software: George, a nod to its birth year, 1984; the big boss likes it. The user guide and install guide win an award from the Society for Technical Communication, my putative (these are after all the first computer manuals I’ve ever written) peers.
Once the modem is out on the market, I land a slot in the new five-member department marketing our PC modems. No more admin jobs!

Nevertheless, in winter of 1984-5, the computer business, having gone through a ridiculous boom, is retrenching. Layoff stories are in the papers every day; rumors are floating around my company. However, I persist in the delusion that I’m safe from being laid off, since, after all, the founder himself hired me.

Well, the founder himself gently gives me the bad news, in person. Maybe it’s a compliment, that he thinks I’ll land on my feet. After all, they’re keeping a barely competent secretary, who gets along so well with the engineering leads that she gives their files names like “Ass” and “Jerk.”

I do get some help. My ex-company offers classes about what to do as a newly laid-off person; they are led by a star of the Human Resources department, who has also been laid off. His advice mostly amounts to working my contacts.

Right. They’ve all been laid off too.

But I find out that my health insurance extends for a several months. Furthermore, I can claim unemployment insurance, which I’ve been paying into my whole working life, including my years in the Napa wine industry and a congressional campaign. I would get this bounty for six months, and it is actually enough to live on, since I live so down-market, about grad student level. I sure got used to living on the lean side in Napa County, what with the one-dollar-over-minimum-wage that the glamorous wine industry doled out. Nothing but part-time work, no bennies—I’ve sure gotten used to bennies since joining the computer biz.
Still, I’m in better shape than a lot of my fellow victims; I have only myself and my cat to support. No mortgage, just rent on my 300-square foot cottage. I paid off my student loan years before, and I own my dinky eight-year-old Honda CVCC free and clear.

The state-run Employment Opportunity office in Palo Alto offers free job search facilities. I get a help session with a director, who is apparently used to people aiming higher than I am. Her reaction when I say I could work for a temporary agency is “Oh, you’re willing to go the frumps? That’s different!” I am indeed willing, determined not to be caught dangling when that lovely $650 a month runs out.

I avidly read all the want ads in the many freebie tech newspapers. The boom in computer books apparently continues, though at a more realistic pace. Waite Group Books, a subsidiary of Howard W. Sams & Co., Inc, a respectable publisher of computer books and a subsidiary itself of Macmillan, Inc., is seeking someone to write something called “The Modem Connections Bible.” I send them my oh-so-slim tech resume, stressing my background at the modem company. It’s generously padded out with every shred of my teaching, training, and writing experience, since my only technical writing at this point is those two George manuals.

I get interviewed. I get hired to write the book. I might be the only applicant. On my way out the door, the man who interviewed me calls out, “Congratulations, Author.” I think this is a little overdone.

He tells me they never give advances. At a tech conference in San Francisco, I find out from another of their authors that of course they do, and it hits me: no advances for babies like me, who don’t know how to negotiate for it.

But I write the thing, in four weeks, in bootlegged WordStar on my PC Junior. I get my coworker in the compatibility lab, who still works at the old company, to do the illustrations that show how to hook up modem x to computer y, but I write 95% of the text, and am first author. I interview another former
colleague, also still at the old company, on exactly how a call progresses, computer to modem to phone line to modem to computer. I explain it step by step, in its own chapter, to my knowledge the first time this has ever been done for a lay audience. When I finish, I have a great sense of exhilaration, and a keen desire to keep doing this.

The Waite Group prints 10,000 copies. I get a royalty check for the first ones that sold, mostly to libraries. That will be the biggest royalty check I ever receive: $402.20. I take it to Kinko’s, make a color copy, frame it, and put it on the wall. Then I cash the check.

Now, besides those two manuals, I have an actual book to brag about on my new resume. It gets me a contract job at a pathetic startup, basically revising manuals for passé products like VisiCalc, formatting them down to five and a quarter inches square, to fit in this company’s cheapo packaging, based on the five-and-a-quarter-inch floppy disk inside. I do the indexes by hand.

At Christmas, 1985, I take a train to New York City to visit my sister’s family, and then back across the country to Kansas City to the other sister’s family, where my mother also is visiting. When I change trains in Chicago, my old home town, on the eastbound trip, I have four hours, and Union Station is right downtown. I walk the familiar—beloved—streets down to Wabash Avenue, to the superbeloved Kroch’s and Brentano’s bookstore. There in the basement, where they sell the tech books, I see, on a table, a stack of *The Modem Connections Bible*. 
Pdf Entry Information

Exhibitor Name: Carolyn Curtis

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Description: my tech biz layoff and its consequences

Notes: