In the teleplay of Jill Goldsmith’s life, chocolate has a featured role.

**FADE IN:** Goldsmith graduates from the Washington University School of Law in 1987. She puts on a suit, picks up her briefcase, and heads for her new job in a Chicago law firm.

Then the plot begins to twist.

“A couple of hours into my first day, I knew I had made a mistake. By lunch, I was on the phone, finding out how to apply for a job as a public defender,” she says. “That was really the job I had always wanted, anyway.”

**FLASH FORWARD:** It is now seven years, and 400 juvenile and felony cases later. Goldsmith, a writer who describes herself as “writing at every opportunity,” has a head full of stories and life lessons, but nowhere to put them. One day, she reads a television script. “I thought: ‘Wow! What a great form,’ ” she recalls. “My hunch was that the experiences I had been living through as a public defender fit this form perfectly.”

**CUT TO THE BIG DECISION SCENE:** Thinking it over, Goldsmith realizes that, while she loves her work as a public defender, she wants to write. Since she doesn’t feel she has the emotional energy to do both, she contemplates resigning so that she can move to Hollywood and take her chances.

Here’s where the story takes a Dickensian turn. Serendipitously, while visiting an incarcerated client, Goldsmith stumbles upon a Hollywood movie shoot on the jail’s parking lot. “I noticed two men whom I assumed to be techies, and I asked them if I could watch. They turned out to be the producer and director. When they learned that I was a public defender, they told me they were shooting the legal thriller *Primal Fear*; sat me in the director’s chair; introduced me to the star, Richard Gere; and treated me like queen for a day. I took it as a sign.”

To the shock of her friends, Goldsmith moves ahead with her plan. She withdraws her pension, gives away most of her possessions and clothes—some to a drag-queen client who always admired her dresses—and heads west with what she calls “my three C’s: my car, my cat, and my computer.”

**CUE THE CHOCOLATE:** On a dark and stormy night in L.A., Goldsmith seeks comfort in a gourmet chocolate shop as she considers giving up her dream and taking the California bar exam. While waiting in line, she tells her story to a sympathetic man who turns out to be David Milch, producer of the ABC television series, *NYPD Blue*. He gives her his business card and promises to read a script if she submits one.

Goldsmith switches into high gear, spending hours in the Museum of Television as she watches every episode of *NYPD Blue*, studying its rhythms, its plots, its characters’ voices. She writes an episode and submits it to Milch. He buys it, produces it, and sets Goldsmith up with the ultimate Hollywood passport: an agent.

**ACT 2:** Goldsmith’s *NYPD Blue* script earns her a job as a staff writer with *The Practice*, ABC’s hit legal drama. “The Practice is a great fit for me. The show’s premise relates directly to my experience as a defense lawyer,” she says.

Goldsmith receives several promotions, and in the fall 2000 season—her third year with the show—her name appears in the credits as executive story editor.

Her scripts draw from life. “I look back at cases I tried, or some I’ve heard about. We also search through Westlaw for..."
interesting cases. All my friends who are still practicing call
me up with ideas. Often, I remember something about a case
that outraged me, or moved me, or sparked my
imagination,” she explains. “Of course, we take
dramatic license. You can’t show the practice of
law the way it really is—motion after motion.
No one would watch it.”

Her first script, which she describes
as “close to my heart,” featured a woman
charged with shaking a baby to death who
retreated into denial.

She based another on a former client
accused of drug dealing: “He didn’t deal,
but he was a user. He came to trial so high
that he passed out at the table. Worse yet,
his pager began beeping during the trial.
Amazingly, he was acquitted.”

Goldsmith finds an opportunity for scrutiny when she
writes about a trial. “When you’re writing closing arguments
for the prosecution and the defense, you have to look at all
sides of the issue. It’s not all black and white. You have to
hold all facets of the story up for people to look at. I feel
myself speaking through all of the characters on the show.”

Writing for The Practice also gives her
a platform for commenting on the legal system.
“There’s a lot of gamesmanship, and, if the
truth gets through, that’s what we’re hoping
for,” Goldsmith says. “I see our legal system
as the best system yet devised. Still, we have
to continually try to make it better.”

WIDE SHOT, L.A. SKYLINE AND
FREeways: Goldsmith looks back at her road
to Hollywood. Hers has not been the linear,
post-law school path she expected. “When
I started going to school, I couldn’t have seen
a way to make my life the way it is now,” she
says. “But looking back, every piece of my ex-
perience was necessary to get me here. The law is so big—it
offers so many options. It can turn into something completely
unexpected. My advice: If you’re drawn to something, do it.
You can’t always see how it all fits together when you start.”

FADE OUT: To be continued. ◆