

The Girl^f Left Behind Me
by Jean Mihi

It was 1937, the depths of the Depression. I was seventeen years old, fresh out of high school. Family life had become stressful. My father had seen a prosperous business fail, and we were all licking our wounds. The eldest of three, I was the only girl. The expectation for a girl of my time and place was that she should, of course, marry suitably, with college and perhaps some professional experience tucked in between. At time marriage seemed remote, but I was eager to go on to college. College was something I took for granted, especially since I had been the class valedictorian and had been offered scholarships. My mother's revelation of the facts of life was devastating. There was no money for books, no money for room and board, no college.

I spent a miserable summer putting in time. Gone were the music lessons, gone the Saturday matinees. All my friends were going off to college. Their fathers had secure government jobs (this was Washington, D.C.). The fact that the public libraries stayed open probably saved my sanity.

In the fall someone told me that Woolworth's, the five and ten cent store, was hiring part-time downtown. Part-time was Saturday from 10:AM to 9:00PM. at 25¢ per hour. I jumped at the chance. Since I still had some 3¢ student street car tickets left, transportation was no problem.

Downtown Woolworth's was a busy place. On my first day I filled out a form and was turned over to a supervisor. She instructed me in the rules, among other things.. I learned ^{about} ~~about~~ the bells. Bells rang at intervals to let you know when you might leave the floor. Three bells and I could leave to eat lunch or for other necessary reasons. I was assigned to Infants Wear. The store was crowded. I spent the day waiting on customers and trotting back and forth to the cashier. By evening I was exhausted.. Finally there was not a customer in sight.. I discovered a seat -- a bench-- under the counter. I pulled it out and sat down. Within

moments my supervisor bore down upon me, her expression one of pure horror.

"Get up! she all but hissed. "Get up!"

I got up.

"Do something," she ordered. "Look busy."

"But I have nothing to do" I whispered. "There are no customers."

"Then find something to do. Straighten the counters."

"But I just straightened them" I all but sobbed.

"Then mess them up and straighten them again. Don't ever let the Floorwalker see you sitting around doing nothing!"

That was how I learned that working for a living was going to be a lot more complicated than I had imagined and I suspected that I still had a lot more to learn about the real world.

I continued to work part-time at Woolworth's. There were no real jobs to be had. Gradually I was able to pick up some temporary work, a few days here and there. Once I found a week's work as a statistical typist at the princely wage of \$7.00 per week. Money remaine scarce

As time went by I did find work. Over some years my jobs included sales clerk, photographer, bookkeeper and legal secretary. The men who hired me invariably referred to me as "my girl". Many a time I heard one of them say to another, "Oh, don't worry about it. I'll have my girl do it." My tasks roamed far beyond the business at hand. I have, without complaint, returned merchandise to the May co. on my lunch hour, typed a wife's thesis and picked up dry cleaning.

Eventually I managed to accumulate enough dollars to take classes at the University. Getting a degree a night takes considerable time. I suspect I was the oldest girl graduate in the history of the state university. I managed a graduate degree and new doors opened for me.

My professional life was happy and gratifying, all but erasing the slings and arrows so often aimed at the working girl. But

ingrained habits die hard. ingrained habits die hard. My work was often stressful and at times I needed a break. And although I was free to indulge in a trivial diversion, I was never free^{FROM} the need for self-defensive tactics. If my destination was frivolous I instinctively tucked my brief case under my arm

and I did not stroll but walked briskly through the halls, my concentrated attention focused straight ahead. In my heart I never forgot the lesson I learned in the five and ten cent store:

"Don;t ever let the Floorwalker see you sitting around doing nothing!"

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Note:

I am 91 years old and am
legally blind. I can touch type but
I cannot see well enough to make
corrections on the typewriter.
I need to place the copy under a
strong magnifier and correct in ink.
. This is nbt very pretty
but it is the best I can do.