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## The World of Work

by Mary Brannigan

Helen

The first thing I noticed about her was the blonde beehive hairdo. It bounced onto the shop floor in unison with her voluptuous figure. This was the day of our induction to work at B J Domigan wholesalers. Miss Murphy loomed towards us saying "take these brooms and sweep the floor. "God, I thought we were shop assistants, hissed Sheila. When we'd completed this intellectually stimulating task further menial jobs were given us.

By the end of the day we'd learned that Molly Murphy was the queen bee among the all female floor staff. The only male employees were the packers and two young men who were trainee managers. They were nephews of the establishment's owner. Donal, who was the quieter of the two, had film star good looks and made me blush when he spoke to me. At sixteen I'd little experience of young men. Seumas seemed to delight in provocative remarks as he crossed our paths. My other half was well able to match him, banter for banter. "He's a bit of all right" said Sheila. "Do you think so" I squeaked. That set the tone for the year ahead.

The other women, aged from twenty to forty, cut us no slack as we learnt the ropes. Sheila held her own from the start, giving as good as she got. I just caved in to their unkindness. Through it all Sheila and I stuck together and soon became friends outside work.

We went dancing at the weekends, where my friend was in great demand. I took second place, glad of the odd partner who came my way. "You need to tart yourself up and you'll get more blokes" said Sheila. As it happened, I met my John on one of our last evenings at the ballroom.

Shortly after this Sheila told me she was going to England to work. I wondered if I'd see her again.

## Sheila

What a first day, I thought as Helen and I finished our first shift at six o'clock in Domigans.

This was not the glamorous job I'd dreamt of when I left school. We were treated like skivvies while we learnt the ropes. The other women were a miserable shower, with Miss Murphy at the top of the pile of tormentors. I was well able for them but timid Helen was fair game. She left herself wide open to the barbed comments, and when we had to take goods out to the packers she blushed at the men's crude humour. I tried to take her in hand but it was an uphill struggle. One day, as we took out a half dozen chamber pots, Jim asked her what they were. As she stood tongue tied I replied, "What do you think, they're overgrown German mugs with lips".

The only bright sparks in all this were Donal and Seumas O'Leary, who were trainee managers. Donal was the quiet good looking one. Whenever he spoke to Helen she went red from the neck up. Seumas was the fun one. He was a right devil, delighting in trying to embarrass us. This was meat and drink to me and he and I enjoyed a laugh while Helen watched. Molly Murphy gave me dirty looks whenever she caught me talking to him. Little did she know what went on when we were alone in the stockroom.

Helen and I started to meet up at weekends for dancing at the Crystal Ballroom. There she'd stand trembling with nerves at the sight of the eejits asking me to dance. I tried to push her forward, but it just wasn't in her. In the end she met up with some bloke as wet behind the ears as herself.

Towards the end of our first year of work I lit out for England. We kept in touch for a couple of months till I got tired of writing. It was a year before we met again on my first day back at Domegans.

"Why'd you come back" did you not like England she said.

"Oh, I missed you and the craic," I replied and asked her about the latest goings on at the firm.

"Well, said Helen, you know Mrs O'Leary the lads' mother, she's just had a baby and her forty seven. Isn't that a scream?"

I hoped she'd never know the truth about this miracle.