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Cupboard Love

by Sandra Banks

A long time ago, I worked as secretary to the Chairman of a substantial company. My job, apart from checking each morning that there was at least one bottle of sherry in the hospitality corner, was largely ceremonial. His minions wrote his letters, asked his questions and reported back.

I was perfectly aware of all the company's future plans and many people dropped by for a chat, saving the Chairman a good deal of time. This was greatly appreciated and I was soon invited to lunch every day in the executive restaurant (waitress service) and given a key to the select lavatories on the top floor. I was the only woman with a key.

I travelled with him, all over Europe. Always first class, staying at very expensive hotels – no Hiltons or things like that. I also travelled on my own. Delivering information or packets which were too sensitive to leave to couriers.

My other job was keeping his life going. His twin girls on half-term holiday came into the office to say hallo to Daddy. I was then handed his credit card and the girls and I had a lovely time. Lunch at the Ritz and shopping at Jaeger or Liberty. His father died and I organized the funeral, answered the letters of condolence, making sure that no two letters were the same. I made sure I ordered living plants rather than cut flowers, so much nicer, you know, particularly those I wanted for my garden. I organized his lavish at home parties and was well rewarded by some of the most fashionable caterers in London.

His wife relied on me for things she had forgotten and I had an excellent relationship with the Manager of Fortnum and Mason. Birthdays, anniversary escapes, holidays, I dealt with everything.

Christmas was a busy time. But it was not one-way traffic. I was surprised by how many presents found their way to my desk, all of which were gleefully appreciated at home. Could we drink that much booze? Perhaps not, but our bottles circulated among our friends.

My job was much more interesting than typing letters or laboriously taking down information over the telephone (no computers or internet then). My friends envied me. So why was I getting so tired of it?

It was my tea breaks in the canteen which enlightened me. I shared a table with five or six other people from the factory and we did the Times crossword in the morning break and the Telegraph crossword in the afternoon break. These were nice people, including the man whose wife counted out his cigarettes in the morning, the woman who was constantly being overlooked for promotion and others who were doing thankless tasks with good humour.

I decided that I had to live my own life and handed in my notice on the excuse that I was getting married. The size of his parting gift made me feel really bad.