

Ten Years in Hell

by Sue Hitchcock

Everybody in my world knew that regular work was only another name for being robbed and dying of boredom. Unfortunately this is the least of the problem. When the new job promised a better than average income, they moved to a house in the catchment area, where their older child would be able to attend a better school where the head was Molly Hattersley, Social Democrat wife of the Labour MP Roy Hattersley. Maybe they had too much hope in the newly-formed party. Anyway, the trap was set. The hefty mortgage required she stayed in the job, despite the pressure.

Had the job been simply boring, it might have been tolerable, but having started with three thousand customers, for whom she was responsible, gradual improvements in working practice and computerisation meant that year by year the number grew finally reaching ten thousand.

Outside work, more problems weighed in. Her widowed mother was showing early signs of dementia and had to be visited, two hundred miles away. When St Martin's School of Art amalgamated with the Central, her husband's job was dissipating, requiring a move from the Sculpture department he loved, to learning to assist in the Photographic darkroom, something about which he knew nothing.

She had found some comfort in a secret lover, but this affair had to end and in her distraught state, there was no disguising it from her husband. In a night of confession and tears, they decided separation was impossible because they both wanted the children and it was decided he should leave work and study for a degree. He needed, for both their sakes, to expand his horizons. Maybe he would end up as a teacher. She felt she could still bear the weight of the household expenses and besides, he would qualify for a maintenance grant from the council.

The new optimism did little to alleviate the pressure on her and gynaecological problems made menopause seem most desirable.

She was moved to a new section, doing the same work. Her colleagues were mainly older women. One had had a heart attack, another suffered excruciating arthritis and Mrs Bagnall, the friendly manager, had been abandoned by her husband, after the removal of both breasts when cancer was discovered. There was no room to complain, even when the only younger woman on the team had a nervous breakdown, leaving all her work to the newcomer, now doubling her workload. Life was unbearable and the view from the seventh floor window was becoming overly familiar.

When the time came for the hysterectomy, it was like a holiday, but the day of her return coincided with Mrs Bagnall's funeral. This was the turning point. This job was not just boring, it was fatal and she finally did the sensible thing and found a kinder job, with less pay.