

ONE BIG HAPPY FAMILY

By Audrey Taylor



ILLUSTRATED BY CHARLES PITTS

A 'NEW WOMAN' NOVEL

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I'm really not sure how I got myself into this. Nevertheless, I'm standing here in these snazzy jeans Mrs. McHugh's found among her daughter's things. They fit snugly over the constricting panty girdle, almost like a second skin, but Mrs. McHugh only pooh-poohs my complaints about them being too tight. The tight Lycra prison effortlessly maintains a flattened front, offering no indication of the masculinity lurking underneath.

I still use my old Nikes to and from work; they fit a *lot* differently because of the nylons. So roomy and slippery now, like my feet have shrunk, they force me to lean over yet one more time to tighten the laces. The straining nylons tug against the girdle's garters pressing into my smooth thighs to leave behind telltale marks at the end of each day.

I never should have inquired about the dangling garters. "They keep your girdle in place, silly." I still hear her voice dooming me to the sleek nylons.

My long hair is swept back over my ears. I take a moment to study my eyebrows more intently, appreciating how much neater they look thanks to Mrs. McHugh's handiwork last night. While I was glued to the TV, watching two college basketball teams vie for the number one spot, my scraggly brows were getting a much needed trim. Her tweezers meticulously located and plucked out each errant hair at the root even as she maneuvered carefully to stay out of my field of vision.

I wonder how long it will take for them to fill in again? Were they *that* arched before?

Smiling at my reflection, I'm having trouble remembering exactly how they looked previously. All this certainly changes the attitude of my face, giving it a more sensitive, almost graceful appearance. I'm sure the facial cream I'm using every night is at least partly to blame. My skin's never been this smooth. Arching my left brow, it's fun to flirt with my intriguing image. Who is that person? Strange, she almost looks *pretty*.

It's been like a nonstop roller coaster ride exploring all the exciting new areas Mrs. McHugh constantly introduces me to. Like when she loaned me her depilatory cream right after I moved in, how soft and smooth my legs felt when I washed away the hair that had been there for God knows how long. They felt so odd, especially when I drew the nylons up each leg (to help keep them warm), deftly attaching the garters to the slinky material.

So many delicious new sensations I've had to deal with since starting the job at Vanity Fair!

With a sigh, I dragged myself away from the mirror to find my jacket. Mrs. McHugh was already gone, as were Patrick and Barney, so I reluctantly put my arms through the sleeves and closed the two front buttons. The kidskin fabric fit snugly as I drew it tightly around my neck before venturing outside into the gusting winds blowing off Lake Michigan.

The shop was only two blocks away, two long avenue blocks which felt more like two miles. Walking determinedly with my head tilted into the wind, I was hoping the people that passed weren't paying much attention to me. The jacket barely reached my hips, leaving my well-defined feminine bottom right out in plain sight. A matching head scarf kept my ears covered while effectively hiding any lingering traces of masculinity that might still be noticeable.

With relief I stepped into the relative calm of Vanity Fair's storefront, a welcome haven from the blustery cold. Stoic mannequins, adorned sexily in their lacy undergarments, greeted my shivering face, oblivious to the swirling winds and frigid weather just beyond their glass enclosure. Wistful memories of my first glimpse of them flew through my head before I hesitantly went inside. The chime of the front door bell greeted me as I hurried to the cozy confines of my office in the rear.

"Hi, Katalina," two of the salesladies greeted me pleasantly, almost an echo of each other. I smiled a silent greeting even as I cringed at their use of my feminized name. Where is Christopher? He's no more—orders from Mrs. McHugh, intent on avoiding all masculine references inside the store.

My own passivity continues to amaze me, I am utterly bewildered by the ease with which I accepted her never-ending suggestions, each one taking me ever deeper into the wondrous world reserved for women only. Was this job *that* important? I reached beneath my desk to slip on the low heels I wore around the shop, trying once more to understand why I hadn't just looked for other employment. Sure, it would have entailed finding a new place to live, but was that *that* big a deal? I could have moved back to Betty's, I suppose. A dilemma, but right now I'd better get the Olga order ready before the sales rep walks in at 11.

How It All Began

My first sight of those mannequins made me stop in my tracks, as I slowly took in their lacy undergarments and elegant nightgowns. The want ads peeked out from the newspaper folded under my arm as I thought once more about the stock clerk position here. The trip from home was over fifty miles door to door. *How will I ever handle the commute* my brain kept asking during the ninety-minute trip through the sprawling city.

They *must* be looking for a woman and yet the owner I spoke to yesterday hadn't mentioned that. Anyway, my desperation was becoming intense. Out of work for over three weeks, my reserve funds weren't going to last much longer. I had to find something, and soon.

When I asked one of the sales ladies where Mrs. McHugh was, she pointed towards the rear of the shop and turned her attention to a customer. Passing by several women

browsing the racks, I could sense that I was definitely intruding in their private domain.

What was I doing here anyway? Embarrassment threatened to overwhelm me and I had to keep repeating to myself that every retail store needed good record-keeping, whether they sold auto parts, musical instruments or ladies apparel, as this shop obviously did. Actually "intimate ladies apparel" would have more precise, but I was too flustered to pay much attention to those kind of details. My mind was racing. I could get used to anything, I thought. Anyway, she'd probably take one look and laugh me right out the front door.

Walking past the curtain into the rear, I saw several cubicles which I approached tentatively. Glancing into the first one caused an instantaneous screech. "There's a man in here!" I diverted my eyes quickly but couldn't help registering the naked lady who'd been standing on a small platform, another woman at her side tugging something up her body.

She wasn't really naked, I realized immediately. She was wearing some kind of underpants, whatever they're called and they looked pretty uninviting. Much of her excess flab bulged out in disgusting fashion. I stood there transfixed, my eyes diverted downward, without a clue as to my next step. Off in the distance, I could hear the woman grumbling while she scrambled to cover herself.

"You must be Mr. Getty," a woman's voice came from over my shoulder causing me to turn and look up. "Why don't you take a seat in the office at the end?" Her smile broadened when she saw my frightened face. "I'll be with you in a moment." The voice had a calming effect on me.

I watched her enter the cubicle from which grumbling was still emanating, speaking soothingly to the ladies within. Finally, I got myself unglued and moved to the cubicle she had indicated. It was obviously her office and I found a seat to plop into.

This interview was not getting off to a good start. I couldn't help but picture the hanging breasts of the lady as she leaned over, straining with determination to move the garment up her body. I knew ladies wore a variety of confining undergarments; now I understood why.

Maybe I should just leave before I embarrass someone else, I thought. Who was I kidding? I didn't stand a chance at getting this job. Only desperation kept me glued to the chair as I slowly took in the surrounding office. There were several mannequins and busts off to the side with an array of ladies undergarments covering them. Some interesting pictures adorned the walls; they were mostly French Impressionist, all women at a variety of leisure activities. The desk was neat. Orderliness was definitely a priority of the occupant, and the fresh flowers sitting brightly in the pink vase on the side table gave a pleasant scent to the immediate area.

"Whew, *you* certainly caused a stir!" she said, smiling as she took a seat behind the desk. She was a distinguished-looking older woman, probably in her mid-forties. Almost thirty myself, I had learned to be tolerant in this area, realizing I'd join her ranks soon enough. Preparing to enter a new decade had focused my attention on the inevitable journey of time.

"I'm sorry about that," I said, trying to find my composure. "I had no idea there would be naked women back here," I offered in my own defense. "The lady up front told me you were back here but never mentioned anything about that." I was hoping she accepted the encounter as an accident.

"I fully understand, Mr. Getty. Let's just forget it." I let out a quiet sigh of relief. "That usually doesn't go on back here. Most customers use the private changing rooms up front. This woman insisted she needed a saleslady to help her, so they decided there was more room back here. They forgot about the possibility of casual passersby. They'll think twice about doing *that* again," she said, a smile appearing on her face. "I really do need some draw curtains. It certainly wasn't your fault."

I could feel the tension leaving my body as I watched her trying to locate my resume. I sat there waiting.

She studied me rather closely for a moment, taking in my clothes before mentioning quite offhandedly, "You're not very tall, are you?"

"Five-five, Mrs. McHugh," glad for the nameplate on her desk, wondering what my height had to do with anything. "My mother's genes, I guess. She was only four-eleven. My dad was close to six feet, yet I never did take much after him. Is there a height requirement for the job?" My attempt at joviality definitely missed.

"Of course not," was her quick reply. "I was wondering if it was a sensitive area for you, but apparently it isn't." She dropped her eyes to the resume as I squirmed in my seat. This was sure going weird.

"I see you've had similar positions at Joe's Auto Parts and Marvel Interiors. Can you tell me a little about what you did at these places and why you're seeking a new position? I'm interested in the systems they used for maintaining stock. If you could elaborate on that, I would appreciate it."

"Well," I began, desperately trying to organize a good response. "I was at Joe's almost three years. Just recently they've been having money problems. My paychecks actually bounced twice last month. Everybody kind of knew something was wrong, yet when they let me go it still caught me by surprise." The hurt remained close to the surface. I still choked up a little at the feelings of rejection.

"I can certainly understand that," she said, her sympathy apparent. "Could you tell me about the type of system you had there and what your actual responsibilities were?"

Mentally punching myself for losing track of her question, I proceeded. "We had a 4150 computer, where we kept every product they carried, its current stock and a lot of other information. You know, the cost, the selling price and even substitutes in case we ran out of inventory for an item. We had over 10,000 SKU's in the system."

"What's an SKU?" she inquired.

"It stands for Stock Keeping Unit. Every item sold has a unique part number, which identifies the color and size and any other distinguishing features. After an item is sold, the system automatically calculates the sale in the computer and adjusts inventory. It's really easy, as long as the correct item number is entered at the time of sale."

She was watching me intently, “You make it sound simple.”

“It truly is, once everyone knows how to identify products properly. From ordering to receiving to selling, a product has to be tracked carefully. You have to watch out for delivery mistakes from the manufacturers. They make so many errors, it's had to figure out how they can stay in business. If you don't catch it when it comes in, it just makes a big mess for you. You certainly can't assume the vendors know what they're doing.”

“You seem well versed in all the details,” she said, sounding impressed. “The current stock clerk who's been with us for three months doesn't really grasp the details well. She doesn't check deliveries against the purchase orders and she's always complaining that there's just too much to do. Somehow, she manages to find plenty of time for coffee breaks and personal days off. I hope that's not a problem for *you*.”

“I'm pretty healthy,” I assured her. “I was out sick once this past year.”

“That's good.” I admired the lines of her face, soft yet dignified for a woman her age. She obviously took great pains to maintain her appearance. She interrupted my thoughts as she explained further, “It's become impossible to deal with the customers properly. We're never sure what's in stock. I can't tell you how often we come back empty-handed to the customer, even though the computer shows the item is in stock.

“Fortunately, our salesgirls are good at substituting other styles that are in stock, but the amount of lost time and customer disenchantment is high. No one likes to deal with an inefficient operation for very long. It infuriates me to watch customers walking out grumbling to themselves about the time they've wasted, not to mention the frustrations of my girls.”

“It's amazing what a difference an accurate stock system makes,” I sympathized. “Too many people only appreciate it when it's not working.”

Mrs. McHugh nodded, “I've had to promise my staff I'd correct the problem soon, before they lose total confidence and start deserting me. That's why getting the right person is so important. I *must* solve this problem once and for all—permanently.”

“Why are you smiling?” she asked, noticing my grin.

I explained how the same situation had existed at Joe's and how relieved everyone was when I finally got the system working properly. It took almost six months, but when it was finally running like a dream. The system—MY system—was a strong contributor, I was told, to the 15% increase in sales they experienced the following year.

My last point definitely impressed her and she went on to ask about my future plans. She noted I was single and ascertained I had never been married. “I hope you're not the type to be chasing after every skirt you see.” She had to be concerned for all the ladies around the shop.

“Certainly not.” I was a little put off by the insinuation. “I don't ‘run after skirts’ as you put it,” I said, trying to control myself. “You can be assured I do *not* treat women as sex objects!” I hoped that made the point. She seemed surprised when I told her I just hadn't met the right girl yet.

“Maybe your standards are too high?” she offered. “You're almost thirty. Don't you wonder if life might be passing you by?”

That question seemed personal, but I answered it anyway, “Not really. I feel quite strongly that I should only settle down when the right person comes along. It may be lonely sometimes, but I've found you really can't rush the process. I'd rather socialize with friends and swim regularly, than be stuck in a forced relationship that doesn't work. I also spend a lot of time at the library. Greek mythology is sort of my hobby.”

“I didn't mean to pry,” she said, sensing my annoyance at her intrusion. Then why did you ask these questions? I wondered.

She went on to delve into my feelings about being around women all day long and having to deal exclusively with women's clothing.

“I love women!” I answered bluntly, knowing it traced back to my Mom. I used to hang around with her in the kitchen when she prepared dinner every evening, and I always seemed to make friendships with her women friends, too. Over the years, this pattern continued as many of my friendships with women remained platonic.

I went on to her second concern, “There's no difference between keeping track of screws or ladies blouses. In the computer they're both just a stock number and are ordered, sold and tracked in the exact same fashion.” That seemed to satisfy her so I asked about their computer system and was happy to discover it was the same kind I had worked on at Marvel Interiors.

When I answered her question about my commute, her look of concern was genuine.

“There's no doubt I'd have to move closer,” prompting thoughts of where I might find some place in the area that would fit my budget.

The interview finally drew to an end and we stood up simultaneously. I hadn't really noticed before how she towered over me. Her high heels added to her already taller stature, but at my height this wasn't something unusual. She was probably 5'7" or 5'8" and I couldn't miss her rigid posture; my eyes were automatically drawn to her full bosom and slim waistline. Quite an eyeful. She was probably wearing a corset of some kind, I theorized.

She interrupted my daydreaming, “So, Mr. Getty. Your background is impressive. I'll need to check a few references before I make a final decision. Could you call me tomorrow, in the morning, sometime after 11?”

“Sure,” I readily agreed, having difficulty keeping the excitement out of my voice. She actually wanted to hear from me!

“Please avert your eyes,” she said. Her advice wasn't really necessary as we walked past the screaming cubicle. I didn't need any further complications. Instead, I fixed my eyes on her generous rear end and watched with appreciation all the way to the front door. Her smile was sincere as she shook my hand before I turned to leave.

“By the way,” she commented, making me turn around once more, “you'll probably need some sort of uniform for work. I hope that won't be a problem. You know, something to make you a little less conspicuous around all these ladies.”

“A uniform?” My curiosity immediately surfaced.

“I’m not really sure what it will look like. I’ll have to work on it,” she sloughed it off. I realized I’d probably be willing to wear a suit of armor if it came to that. I had no idea what type of uniform she was alluding to, but I couldn’t imagine it being much of a problem.

The cold morning air couldn’t deflate my exhilaration as it slowly sank in that I was actually under consideration. Serious consideration.

Maybe I *wasn’t* going to starve. Just maybe. I decided it was time to have breakfast, a meal I’d been skipping of late, to celebrate the way the interview went.

Over bacon and eggs, my thoughts kept turning to my need to move. I was not really thrilled by the prospect of going through it once again. I didn’t own much, only a bed, some stereo equipment and a small TV, but still it would be a hassle. I’d been in the same two-room apartment for the past three years and had become pretty comfortable with it. Mrs. Goodman, my landlady, would probably be sad to see me go, but I couldn’t worry too much about that right now. The commute would just be impossible. I was already feeling uneasy just thinking about the ninety minute trip home.

I’d better not get my hopes up, I kept reminding myself, as I dug into the home fries and toast; I was thoroughly enjoying every bite of the unaccustomed meal. Mrs. McHugh hadn’t mentioned salary and I wondered whether it would measure up favorably against my last paycheck.

What kind of uniform could she be thinking of? I paid at the front register and closed my threadbare coat tightly before venturing forth once again into the frozen outdoors.

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Yes, he’s the one. Perfect. The right build, almost like a fragile statue. He wasn’t more than five-four (even though he said five-five) and probably not 140 pounds soaking wet. And his experience seems ideal.

I’ll just have to devise a way to help him fit in quickly, so my customers aren’t shrieking all the time. His complexion is clear and his hair is full and long. Maybe a smock of some kind and we’ll pull the hair back into something a little more ladylike.

Yes, like that little old lady said, opportunity certainly seems to be knocking. I mustn’t let it get away.

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By the time I got home, a message was already waiting with Mrs. Goodman, asking that I call Mrs. McHugh when I arrived. I thanked Betty. Her hopeful smile accompanied me upstairs. I warmed up a bit with a cup of coffee before dialing the number.

“Ah, Mr. Getty,” Mrs. McHugh’s voice sounded encouraging. “Your reference at Joe’s Auto Parts was quite good. Mr. Carter had only pleasant things to say about you. He still regrets having to let you go and worries about not having someone of your

competence watching the inventory.” I remembered his parting words and was glad he had come through on his promise of a good reference.

Mrs. McHugh was saying, “I’m waiting to hear from your boss at Marvel Interiors. She should call back soon. I hope you’ll hold off accepting any other offers ‘til you hear from me.” Her concern seemed quite genuine. She really wanted me.

“Certainly, Mrs. McHugh,” I assured her. She should only know. “I won’t make any decisions until I hear from you again.”

“Thank you, Mr. Getty.” Her relief was apparent. “I wondered what your availability is, if you were to join us.”

“Whenever you’d like,” I answered. “I’m pretty open,” I said, thinking she’d probably want me to start the following Monday.

“That’s great.” She sounded pleased. “Well, I’ll talk to you later. Definitely no later than tomorrow morning. Good-bye, Mr. Getty.”

Margaret Peal from Marvel Interiors immediately popped into my head; she was obviously the person Mrs. McHugh was waiting to hear from. She was a devious business woman and I could only hope she wasn’t about to ruin my chance for this job. I’d left there under uncomfortable circumstances.

After spending more than three years getting their inventory and purchasing systems in good working order, Ms. Peal had wanted me to assume more responsibility. This involved taking over the customer service department, which I quickly decided against. Controlling the three girls in that department was not what I considered a promotion.

Things were never the same after that. I was forced to look for a new position after one particular stormy session in Ms. Peal’s office, where she unloaded on me for some computer error I had absolutely nothing to do with.

I guess I’m just your typical human being. I like to be appreciated for a job well done and I certainly don’t need undue criticism for mistakes made by others. A rash developed all over my body, which I assumed was a nervous reaction, in anticipation of Mrs. Peal’s next attack. Fortunately the opening at Joe’s Auto Parts came along when it did and I didn’t hesitate to accept the position. It hardly surprised Ms. Peal when I gave notice. She must have already been looking for my replacement.

Would she say nasty things about me, like she’d been doing before I left, or would she remember the good results I’d attained prior to that?

Realizing it was out of my hands, I tried relaxing on the bed with a spy novel.

Betty came up soon after to invite me down for something to eat. We’d grown closer lately; I was around much of the time and she seemed to like the company. Her sweet nature often chased away the blues that regularly haunted me.

I told her about the job interview and she listened attentively while I described the store and the job requirements.

“Won’t that be difficult for you, being surrounded by women all the time?” That same question. “I’m surprised you’re even being considered. You’ll probably be envel-

oped into a world of femininity, not to mention the constant distraction of half-dressed women running around all the time. Won't they be put off by a man's presence?" She was having a hard time understanding why I would be considered for a job in such an environment.

I admitted my own confusion and surprise. "I can't be very choosy at the moment. Maybe once I have the system up and running, the job market will improve and I'll find something more suitable. I'm sure Mrs. McHugh will hide me somewhere in the back, far away from all the ladies in their undies. And she *did* say I'd be wearing a uniform of some sort."

"Still sounds strange to me," Betty said, shaking her head, "but I guess you've got to do *something* to keep a paycheck coming in." She was thoughtful a moment, "You know, Chris, if things got real tight, I wouldn't press you for the rent. I really don't want you taking something that isn't right for you."

Uh oh. Feelings of guilt hit the pit of my stomach, forcing me to put down the sandwich before I could take a bite. What a caring woman! How was I going to break the news of my impending move? Nothing was decided yet really, so I put it aside for the time being.

The phone rang, even as I searched for a new subject. "Saved by the bell," I thought, and I watched Betty get up to answer it.

"It's for you, Chris," she said, handing me the phone. I stretched the cord into the kitchen, hoping to find a little privacy.

"Hello."

"Hi again." Mrs. McHugh's vibrant timbre came through clearly. "I hope I'm not interrupting anything."

"Not really," I replied. "We were just having lunch."

"Good. I just talked with Ms. Peal who also had loads of good things to say about you. Her only concern was your lack of ambition. Did you really turn down a promotion?"

"Yes," I answered hurriedly. "I had no interest in supervising a customer service department filled with three cranky women. They were moody, spoiled brats, only interested in their boyfriends and making plans for after work, hardly concerned with whether their jobs got done or not. I already had my hands full with inventory control and purchasing. I didn't want their headaches, too." I hoped Mrs. McHugh didn't expect me to become the store manager.

"I understand, Chris," she said in a sympathetic tone, using my first name. "I know this is kind of fast, but my problem gets worse with each passing day. I don't expect an immediate answer, but I'd like to offer you the stock clerk position at Vanity Fair. The salary is \$625 a week, and you'll get an annual review. And, of course, the usual holidays and fringes. I'm sure you understand the need for the uniform you'll be wearing. I can still hear the shrieking woman from this morning. It will certainly make you less conspicuous." She went on to explain the hours and what she'd be expecting of me.

"How about medical coverage?" I asked, my mind racing.