

# OFFICE GIRLS



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by

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## OFFICE GIRLS

I really didn't need to work at all. Let's face it, mummy has tons of money - and didn't really want me away from her - she can be somewhat possessive at times. Frankly, after I finished college, I think she wanted me to stay at home and keep her company. College HAD, however, given me a certain degree of confidence - at least enough to complain that I had to make some new friends - but which was really my desperate attempt to get some respite from her and Mary (Her personal maid/cook/housekeeper) who thought the earth revolved around her employer - and gave the impression that I was just a pest around the house - one that was tolerated, simply because mummy wanted it that way for some inexplicable reason.

Finding a job turned out to be no problem once mummy relented. It was surprisingly easy to land it as a matter of fact. Of course, I didn't know then to what extent mummy participated in the company management - thought I was hired on my charm and qualifications alone - which may have been an erroneous assumption on my part. Anyway? It was easy and I welcomed the chance to get out of the house for at least eight or nine hours each day. Of course, mummy made sure that she got her pound of flesh in the evening and weekends - but it wasn't so bad then as a matter of fact. I had gradually slipped back into our evenings at home - found them to be nice and calming after the workday. Complained about having to stay in of course, but was secretly content most of the time - just went out a few nights a week to show I could.

There were four ladies at the office - all clerical. Paula and Jasmine, senior clerks then Audrey a clerk, and Rose, Mr. Paulus' secretary. Three males. The office manager, Mr. Paulus, then myself - a senior clerk, then Tom the junior clerk.

It was a happy place. Mr. Paulus was an easy going, gentle person. Rose was plump and motherly. Paula and Jasmine would look at the three males with a barely hidden impatience because, quite honestly, we tended to bumble along in a dazed way. I was pretty sure that Audrey was jealous of my position as a senior. After all, she had been there more than two years before I arrived - and had been the one to train me. I

think she was bent out of shape when I got promoted before her - but didn't see why it should bother her so much.

Like any other office, I suppose there were petty jealousies - maybe I have very little experience, but I pride myself on being a perceptive human being. Okay, us three males formed a sort of clique - called ourselves the "Hero-Trio" in the face of the feminine disapproval we faced every day - but what the hey - so we took lengthy lunches - and maybe an extra martini now and then - but rank has its' privileges, right? Sometimes I sensed that the women really wanted to tear into Tom - he WAS the supposed junior in the hierarchy, presumably - but every time they'd raise any kind of complaint, or criticism Mr. Pauley would joke them out of it - or Rose would make some motherly comment to calm the troubled waters. I wasn't too sure where I stood with the ladies to be honest. I just knew that I often got a very nervous feeling when Mr. Paulus and Tom would both be out of the office at the same time, leaving me by myself, with only the women for company - almost like a lump of meat out there in the ocean with sharks circling around - except that Rose was always there to protect me.

But then, suddenly, things changed. Without any warning whatsoever, Mr. Paulus retired! Without a word to anyone. I heard Audrey sniggering something like "High time they got rid of Polly! The old fool was a liability in here. Glad that someone finally took things in hand!"

I wanted to chastise her - was she sincerely intimating that Mr. Paulus had been forced to retire? This was almost too much! A kindly, gentlemanly fellow like him - a liability! But, to tell the truth, I decided against it. There had been a marked change in the power structure inside the office - and if it hadn't been for Rose, things might have got even more uncomfortable. The women seemed to feel that they were now in power - ridiculous!

Then, to my dismay, Rose decided to retire as well. I think she was offered the post of the new Manager's secretary, but declined. After meeting Miss Chills I understood perfectly - a cold, blonde woman - her name was most appropriate, I thought. Much younger than Mr. Paulus - but with a certain, although constrained, ambition about her. Certainly NOT into leisurely lunches and the occasional martini! I resolved to

behave until she had the chance to recognize my potential for contributing to the profits made by the office.

Then, the Monday after Rose left, Miss Chills had a general staff meeting. There was another lady now, who she introduced thus- ly. “Ladies? I’d like you all to meet Miss Jones - though you’ll probably want to call her Edith. . .” She paused, her eyes falling on Tom. “You - young man? Is something wrong? Do I detect something in your facial expression - that shows you’re disturbed?”

“Eh - well, Miss Chills? I’m not.. eh . . used to being addressed .. as . as a lady?” He gave her a tentative smile

She fixed him with a wintry glare. “Young man? I see nothing to smile about. You will learn quickly that I do not have a great deal of admiration for the male sex. AND? From what I’ve been given to understand? The males in this office have NOT been given to pulling their weight. In MY vocabulary? Calling someone a ‘lady’ is a compliment. Do you object to my complimenting you?”

Tom shriveled, noticeably. “No Miss Chills. I guess not. Not when you put it ..”

She ignored him - totally. Turned her glare on me. “And YOU sir? Do you feel like complaining when I compliment you?”

I found myself blushing like a schoolboy but, amazed at my savoir faire, I leaned back in my chair and answered. “Ma’am? No ma’am. Of course not!”

She rewarded me with a tight smile. “Very well!” Then she swung her eyes slowly around the assembly. Then, her eyes fixed on me, started speaking again. “Ladies? (Pause) As I was saying ..”

Edith Jones quickly became a power in the office. They didn’t demean her by calling her a ‘secretary’. Oh no - she was “Executive Assistant “. Dark, mature - in her mid-forties, she was older than Miss Chills and, being dark haired and complexioned, was the perfect foil for her. But where Miss Chills was cold and haughty, Edith was very ingratiating - in a smarmy sort of way - though god help anyone that crossed her!

Tom was the poor fellow who was the first to learn this. One morning, shortly after she started, she came out of

her office - where she guarded Miss Chills like a centurion. Crooked her fingers at Tom. "Have you got coffee there?" she said loudly..

Tom looked at his cup in some confusion. "Yes, Edith, About a half a cup I'd say."

"NO! In the POT!" she said.

He looked over his shoulder "Yes. There's about a half pot there."

"Very good! Would you pour Miss Chills a cup - black please? And while you're at it? I'll have a cup too. Just a little cream - and two sugars please."

"But... But.. We all get our own coffee here .."

"Very democratic, I must say," she sneered. "But Miss Chills is the office manager, is she not?"

"Yes."

"And I am the Executive Assistant - am I not?"

"Yes."

"And, if memory serves me correctly, aren't you the junior employee here?" Her voice was very sarcastic now.

Before he could answer. Miss Chills appeared behind Edith in the doorway. "Some problem here, ladies?"

"Oh no, Joanna," Edith said. "I'm just giving this young man a lesson on office hierarchy. Do you understand what I've been saying?" she asked Tom.

"Yes Edith, I think so," he said slowly.

"Then please bring the coffees into Miss Chills office. Smartly now - chop chop!" Her orders given, she turned her back confidently and she and Miss Chills went back into the office.

Embarrassed for poor Tom, I kept my face down on my work as he made his way to the coffee maker and poured two cups. I sensed him pass my desk on the way to Miss Chills office, then once he was out of sight, lifted my head again. That way, I saw him return - with the two cups still in his hands, his face flaming with embarrassment. Again, I avoided his eyes, wondering what he'd done wrong - but then he repeated his trip, this time carrying the two cups on a tray. I

heard Audrey's poorly suppressed snigger as he did so.

But worse was to follow. A little while later, Edith re-appeared and called for him.

"Yes, Edith?" He said quietly.

"Come and get the dirty cups, would you dear?" she cooed, "then you can wash them for us - if you don't mind?"

I think he was ready to quit there and then - but I knew that his finances wouldn't let him do anything like that, without having a new job lined up.

"Where do you want me to wash them, Edith," was his only reply.

She pointed to the ladies room. "Why, in there, of course. But dear? Do check before you go in, if you don't mind. Just make sure it's vacated."

We had a staff meeting later that day. Miss Chills went over some administrative details, then turned the meeting over to Edith. Edith went and stood in the center of the office. Pointed at Tom. "Would you come here and stand beside me, please?"

She was smiling in her normal smarmy fashion, so he pasted a smile on his face and went and stood beside her. Like myself, he is small and being that she's bigger than him anyway, in her heels, she practically towered over the poor chap. Then, she surprised everyone by putting a possessive arm around his shoulders.

"I owe this young man a public apology," she started. "I'm afraid I was rude to him this morning, in front of you all, and now I feel I should say I'm sorry in the same way."

"Oh - that's all right, Edith," he said, blushing again. "I didn't mind bringing your coffee - or washing the cups afterwards."

"You didn't?" she said. "Well, that's good - because that'll be one of your chores from now on. We'll have our coffee first thing in the morning - then at break times - and any other times when Joanna has company and desires that tea or coffee be made."

He obviously made an attempt to pull away from her, but she simply smiled and held him closer if anything,

cuddling the poor, unwilling guy, to her side.

“Bit.. But.. Edith? I thought..”

“Thought what, dear child?”

“That. . that .. you were apologizing for making me get the coffee - and clean up afterwards?” he stammered.

“Why on earth would I do a thing like that, huh? As Junior employee around here, you’re expected to do what any senior employee tells you to do - without argument! I was simply apologizing for the tone of voice I used when I spoke to you. That’s all.” “You mean You want me to serve your coffee - and Miss Chills all the time?”

“Now you’ve got it! Exactly! You’ll also make the coffee and tea in the morning when you first come in. Make sure you keep them fresh - and do the clean up as well.”

“But Edith? We’ve always served ourselves in the past,” I spoke up.

“Andrew?” Miss Chills spoke. “You make your own coffee - or tea?”

“Why, no, Miss Chills.”

“Who does?”

I blushed. “Truthfully? I don’t know. One of the ladies?”

“So it could be Paula or Jasmine - both of whom are senior to you - or Audrey?”

“Yes, I suppose so,” I admitted.

“Well then. For your information? Thomas is the junior employee here - and has been given that chore. Audrey will be his backup for the days .

“WHAT?” Audrey bellowed. “I don’t make or serve drinks. Take your job and stuff it!”

With that, she jumped to her feet and headed for the door.

“Oh Audrey! Please? Let me think. Have I been too hasty?” Miss Chills said in the most apologetic tone I’d ever heard her use. “Damn right you have, toots!” Audrey snapped. “I’m senior to Andrew here in terms of time spent - I’m a

damn sight better worker and know a helluva lot more than he does about the business. He just got promoted because of his mummy being part owner.” She sneered audibly when she mentioned mummy. “Audrey? Your language is most unladylike, and..” Miss Chills said in a mildly reproofing tone of voice.

“Ask me if I give a shit!” Audrey interrupted. “I’m sick to death of this place. But you were saying something about being hasty?” Her eyes gleamed and she paused on her way to the door. “Yes,” Miss Chills smiled tentatively. “Perhaps I should re-consider and take length of time into the equation instead of position. What do you think Edith?”

Edith shrugged. “Your call Joanna. In my estimation? Audrey is, by far, better than Andrew in her capabilities to do the job and

“Wait a minute! That’s not fair!” I interrupted. “I’m just...” “I’m tired of the unladylike behavior going on around here!” Miss Chills snapped at me. “Talk properly!”

“I’m sorry, Miss Chills - but I’m not a lady,” I said lightly, trying to defuse the situation.

“That’s not something to be proud of around me!” she snapped again, obviously not mollified. “Now to my mind? Audrey may have a valid objection to being Thomas’s back up as coffee girl. I’m just trying to determine what a fair way of doing this is. So please be quiet while I think!”

Totally intimidated by this woman, I sat there gaping. She had, inadvertently or not, referred to Tom as a ‘coffee girl’ and was now ruminating whether I was to be his back up or not? ME? A back up for a coffee girl!

“Miss Chills. May I please say something?” I asked meekly.

“No you may NOT!” she barked. “And if you continue to speak without permission? I shall make you go and stand in a comer! Understood?”

Well aware of the contemptuous gaze that Audrey was casting in my direction, I simply nodded.

Miss Chills thought for a moment or two, then spoke to me again. “Do you agree that a position in any organization should be based on merit? You may speak now.”

“Yes. That’s correct.” I said this somewhat grudgingly, having some idea where she might go.

“So, as senior clerk, you feel superior to Audrey in your working of problems that would face you in day to day operations?” “Well?” I found myself swallowing. “I wouldn’t say I was superior exactly.”

“Inferior then?” she shot back.

“No. Not that either. I think we’re about the same,” I replied as Audrey snorted derisively.

“Very well,” Miss Chills said. “You should do about the same as her on a test, shouldn’t you?”

“An unbiased test? Certainly!” I responded.

“Very well. Let’s resolve this immediately,” she said. “Paula, Jasmine? You are senior ladies here. I’d like you to go to Andrew’s in box - and take out some of the work he’s due to start. Invent two hypothetical questions based on his incoming work as they would pertain to Inventory, Filing, and Receivables. Then do the same for Audrey. Both candidates will hear exactly the same questions - they will then write down their answers. The first to finish will hold his or her hand up. The other will then answer the question first - immediately. Then the one who finished first may agree or rebut.” She sneered at me. “Does that sound unbiased enough?”

I couldn’t think of any fault in her reasoning and, as it turned out, it wouldn’t have mattered. Edith was assigned the job as moderator. Audrey and I sat at desks, side by side, while Paula and Jasmine stood in front of us taking turns in asking the questions they’d come up with.

Of the six questions, Audrey was the first to hold her hand up every time. Twice, I actually had nothing written down at all when she held her hand up. On my first answer, I was given a ‘barely passing’ grade - which Audrey immediately blew apart, pointing out a few things I’d missed. To make things worse, on the fourth question, Edith asked Audrey to come up with her answer first - to ensure she wasn’t cheating by giving herself more time - and Audrey answered the problem correctly and concisely where I’d barely started writing the answer.

Ashamed and embarrassed, I heard Miss Chills

announce. “Andrew? Effective immediately, you are demoted to the position of Clerk. Audrey? Congratulations! You are now a Senior Clerk. Andrew? You will back Thomas up in the making and serving of refreshments. Do you understand me?”

“Yes Joanna. But I’d like time to think this over,” I said defensively.

“Certainly. Until tomorrow. If you report here then, you will effectively showing that you have agreed to your demotion - and accept your new duties. And?”

“Yes, Joanna?”

“Only my senior staff may address me by my Christian name. You and Thomas, being juniors? Will address me as “Miss Chills” Are we clear on that point?”

Her tone was icy cold - to match her cold stare.

“Yes Miss Chills,” I answered.

I was incensed and ready to quit, but felt it would be more politic to sound mummy out and see what her reaction would be if I did such a thing. On the way home I pondered how to bring up the subject, but I needn’t have bothered - she brought it up herself. “Andrew? I understand that you are having some difficulties with the new office manager at your work?”

Taken aback by this frontal attack, I managed to say. “Well mummy? I wouldn’t go so far as to say I was having difficulties per se.”

Her face showed a measure of disappointment. “I’d thought a demotion would have you quit - out of pride if nothing else - and was SO looking forward to having you back home here, where you belong. I still think that you are being deliberately selfish in working away from here instead of being my companion, as I wish.”

“Oh mummy! I’ll admit that my pride took a beating,” I said hurriedly. “But you know? I quite look forward to the challenge of learning more about office procedures and things like that.” Then I made a tactical error. “But also? I thought it might be a good idea to, maybe, well sort of? Look for another position?”

She positively bristled. “Andrew! Is this how you

accept a challenge - run away? Fine! Go look for another job, but while you're at it? Look for another place to live! I am very angry at you! You seem to want to do anything but stay at home with me. So be it! Let us both see how you fare after I cut off your trust fund!"

"Oh mummy!" I said, panicked at the thought of having to support myself on the miniscule salary I made. "I just meant that it might be good experience for me to get some job interviews - for later on in my life. Certainly not at the moment. I'm perfectly happy where I am."

She seemed somewhat mollified, but said. "You just said that you were looking forward to learning more about your job and procedures - that sort of thing?"

"Yes mummy, I did."

"Well, once you've got all of that learned... wouldn't that make you more qualified when you're job hunting?"

"Most certainly mummy!"

"Then why don't you wait until you have been fully trained and are competent in your new position before looking for another job? Up until that point, I wish to hear no more on this subject! The matter is closed!"

I let out an internal 'whew' of relief. That had been a close thing.