

CHAPTER 20

The First Job



'Lily the Riveter.' A young woman drills a test piece at a government factory during the war, the kind of job that would have been rarely available for a woman before 1940 – and rarely was as soon as war was over.

The interview was at noon so I could travel from Stamford and back in one day. A travel voucher and map of London were supplied. It was the first modern map I'd seen. No street maps were allowed during the war: they might help the enemy to reach Downing Street, or possibly Harrods.

The 1930s were the days of leaving school at 14 or 16, and getting a job that a friend or family member recommended, or one that a career service decided would suit you. Boys had apprenticeships and occupational training back then too, as did women, though they were rare. It could be tough for a girl, as this one stresses.

Being a girl in the 1950s was a contradictory business. On the one hand, as grammar school girls we were encouraged to think ourselves the equal of boys, and to aim as high academically. However the range of jobs actually open to us was quite limited, with teaching, nursing, the civil service and personnel work being the favourites.

I had no idea what job I wanted. The Head said Nursing, but my mother was horrified. I worked in the Joe Lyons sales office until my mother told me I was going nowhere and must move. I did what she told me till well into my twenties. Eventually I went to a small insurance company. Very old world even for 1954, high desks, no telephone, green lamps, but they nurtured me, and made me.

I went into the Civil Service. I said anything but Inland Revenue – my father sends them such horrible letters – but that’s where they assigned me anyway.

One of my five cousins married an ophthalmic optician, and I thought it looked a good occupation: specs were now free on the new NHS. I managed to get in to train as the last entrant at 16, stealing a march on all the others who began at 18. I was one of three women out of a hundred.

I left school at 14 to be a shop assistant at the Houndsditch Warehouse, working all hours for very little, 7/6 a week, no overtime. When I was 16 we went on strike for seven weeks to reduce our hours. I sold the *Daily Worker* outside Goldmans.

I left Parmenters at 15 and got very good grades, but my father felt I had to have a living so I learnt tailoring at pattern-cutting school, and was working in a tailor’s shop in Aldgate when I was called up into the Army for 18 months. I’d done 16 of them when the Korean War began and it was extended to 24. I’d done a bit of singing in the Harmony Club in Egerton Road, where we competed with other clubs with singers like Alma Cogan. After the Army, still tailoring, I had singing lessons with a man who’d starred in *Guys and Dolls* at Max Berman’s school in Tottenham Court Road.

One day in the shop my brother said I should make a profession out of it, so I went to Collins’s Music Hall in Islington for an audition. I walked in, looked round and saw a man cleaning the floor. He turned out to be the manager, Lou Lake, who used sit in the bar like a bloated frog, existing on alcohol. He gave me a week’s work for £6, and kept me on. You got a good house if you were singing before the nudes – who were statues back then, weren’t allowed to move – but a bad house afterwards. Paul Raymond offered me an 18-week tour, but stipulated no TV appearances so I turned it down. I did a week at the Astor club and Bernard Delfont’s agent offered me a tour for the Moss Empires. There were 15 or 16 of them, all the major cities had one, and I was second billing behind Maxine Daniels, earning £25 a week tax-free. I had five or six good years before pop music took over, and my kind of music became old hat.