

My First Real Job

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I hardly slept all night. The next day, I was starting my first real summer job – a salesgirl at McKenzie’s department store. I’d just turned 15.

I had begged my parents to let me interview for this job. It was a big deal. In New Zealand, especially in the rural areas, Exclusive Brethren girls were expected to work as a mother’s helper to a Brethren woman, or on a Brethren farm helping the farmer’s wife prepare meals for the farm labourers. Brethren girls were not encouraged to find a ‘worldly job’.

That’s why we were called Exclusive Brethren – because we lived exclusively, as much as possible separate from the rest of the world. The Brethren believed we were the chosen ones, the only ones who would be called to heaven when the Lord returned. Everyone else would face a thousand years of plague and hellfire.

“But I don’t want to help Mrs. Barnes with all those kids,” I pleaded. “I want a real job.”

I wanted a real job so I could learn more about the real world. I was pretty sure the Brethren’s fundamentalist views and their cult-like rules of exclusion were wrong, but I wasn’t sure how or why. I needed to know.

My sleepless night had been spent worrying about what to wear on my first day. I didn’t want to look like a Brethren girl, I wanted to look like a girl on the American Coca Cola calendars. I loved those girls and their perfect looking lives. On the first of every month, I would rush into the village grocery store to check out the new picture. If the page had not been turned to the new month, I would remind the person behind the counter to do so.

By morning, I had decided my apple green dress with the cinched-in waist and the border of flowers around the hem was most like what a calendar girl might wear.

My father drove me to Palmerston North, a small city about 12 miles from Ashhurst, the village in the lower North Island where we lived. He dropped me outside the store. Immediately he drove away, I dashed to the public washrooms across the street. I undid my plaits and pulled my hair back into a ponytail so tight and high, my eyebrows were raised in a look of surprise. That's how the girls on the Coca Cola calendars did it. I put on a little dab of lipstick -- just enough so I knew it was there but not so much that a Brethren coming into the store would notice.

As I crossed the street and walked back to McKenzies, I felt like a million pounds. I'd perfected the calendar girl look, just needed a red sports car and a good-looking boyfriend. I wondered why all the Brethren boys were so ugly.

I had been fantasising for the past week about which department I'd be working in, and practicing at home. While doing the dishes, I would pretend to sell our plates to imaginary customers.

"This is a beautiful fine china plate," I would explain. "And vegetables look so pretty on a white plate." I'd heard my mother say that.

But my first sales job wasn't china, it was lollies. I was stationed with two other girls behind a long wooden counter with jars filled with every type of sweet you can imagine: pineapple lumps, chocolate fish, hokey pokey, barley sugar, acid drops, jelly babies and humbugs.

Because it was December, we had a few special items at the counter, including some cheap china mugs painted with a Father Christmas, filled with mixed lollies and covered with red or green cellophane paper. I noticed the bottom of the mug was stuffed with crumpled up newspaper and there were only a few lollies on top. The mugs cost five shillings. That seemed a lot to me. But then, what did I know? I was an Exclusive Brethren and we didn't celebrate Christmas. Father Christmas didn't exist.

In my lunch break I wandered around the store and discovered that in the china department, McKenzie's sold the same Father Christmas mugs that were on the lolly counter. But in the china

department they cost less than a shilling. That made me curious. Sheets of cellophane paper sold for two pennies. I figured to fill a mug with mixed lollies would cost about six pennies. That, I thought, means people could buy the separate items and put together three mugs for the price of one mug at the lolly counter. And the mug would be filled with lollies, not stuffed with paper!

I was angry. I did not like being tricked or lied to, hated that about the Exclusive Brethren. I thought they never told the truth about anything. There were Brethren people who acted like saints at church but who did things that were not allowed. For example, Exclusive Brethren were forbidden to have radios and yet there were people who had radios hidden away. We weren't allowed to go to concerts or to the mountain to ski, but I knew Brethren who secretly did these things. I was guilty too; I read books and wore lipstick. Once I'd even gone to the movies. But all this sneaking about made me mad.

I went back to work determined to warn customers about the way they were being tricked. My first afternoon customers were children who'd come to spend their pennies while their parents were shopping around the store. Eventually an older woman came to the counter and was about to buy three Father Christmas mugs, one for each of her grandchildren, she told me.

"Do you know it would be much cheaper for you to buy the mugs and the lollies separately and then stuff the mugs yourself?" I said in my most grown up voice.

I sold her lollies and pointed out where she could buy the mugs and the cellophane paper. She left a happy customer.

Another customer started to show interest in the mugs. I told her the same thing. She was chattier than the first lady so I explained to her, in a pious voice, that I thought it was dreadful the way McKenzie's was lying to customers about the real price of the Father Christmas mugs.

That gave me confidence. I started to tell people, whether or not they were interested in the mugs, about the dishonest practices of McKenzie's.

Mid-afternoon, I was called to the office. The boss of the whole department store was there with Miss R. my supervisor. Something was wrong.

“I believe you have been telling the customers you think McKenzie’s is dishonest,” said the boss.

“Well you sell Father Christmas mugs that are stuffed with paper not lollies,” I said.

“Ginette,” he said sternly as he peered over the top of his glasses, “never, never, never should you discuss such things with the customers.”

“But,” I said, “if they are buying three of the mugs at the counter, that will cost them 15 shillings. They could do it themselves for five shillings.”

“Ginette, I will not say this again. That is not your business. It’s your job to sell them what they ask for – no more and no less.”

“Then you’re a cheat,” I replied.

“And you are without a job,” he said.

I thought quickly. I needed the money and besides, what would my father say if I got sacked on my first day?

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I thought I was helping the customers.”

“We won’t mention it again,” he said and turned and walked away. I think he might have been smiling.

For the next six weeks my father dropped me off each morning at the front of the store. And each morning I would run across the street to the public washrooms to transform myself into the calendar girl. With each week, I got a little bolder. By the end of the holidays, you could

definitely see the lipstick. If I saw a Brethren coming into the store, I would duck down behind the counter and wipe my lips clean and lower my ponytail to a more subdued Brethren look. I got really good at reapplying lipstick and getting my hair readjusted without a mirror.

By the time school started again, I was – as the church leaders later said – well on my way to leaving the light and entering the darkness.