

Factory Fodder

I was only thirteen when I became factory fodder, just as my teachers had trained me to be. They knew the score; they knew that a girl in my circumstances, with a sometimes-out-of-work Bolshevik father would end up in a factory working for that bit of pay, a pittance, that would help make ends meet at home. I, too, knew the score, that when I decided to drop out of school, I would be forced to go straight to work. I knew there would be no dawdling for me. But I was, after all, just a kid, and so I must have been tempted by fantasies of skipping freely down the footpath, sucking on a lolly and singing happy songs without a care in the world when out of the blue some Hollywood talent scout would spy me and pluck me from the street corner to whisk me away to a world of splendour. After all, I had a cute face and curly red hair. I could become friends with Shirley Temple! Why not?

All young girls dream fancy dreams before most of us have them dashed against the rocks of reality. Certainly, I would have known better than to linger on my dreams for long. Dad's stern glances and Mum's exhausted sighs were always there to remind me that life pressed too hard on my family. There was food to get, necessities to buy, rent to pay. If you weren't going to school, in my family, then you were going to work to pull your weight. A child at work meant a weekly contribution to the rent money. It meant one

less mouth to be fed out of my father's wage, one less pair of shoes to buy, one less tram ticket to pay for. A child at work meant the load on Mum and Dad would be lightened.

It wasn't hard for me to find work. After all, I was an under-aged girl, whose wage entitlement was the least of all workers. A girl my age was in demand at factories like the Commonwealth Match Factory in Richmond. There were lots of girls my age who worked on the line there. Perhaps I had learnt you could get a job at the match factory through one of the girls at school, or a girlfriend of Jack's. I don't remember applying for the job, but I do remember exactly how much I was paid once I got it: seventeen shillings and six pence for a week of labour. When our money changed from pounds to dollars in 1966 it turned out that my first wage was the equivalent of one dollar seventy-five! That's not really a fair comparison, since the value of money is so much changed, but remember that 'susso' was twenty shillings a week back then. Here was I, getting what was considered a fair wage for an under-aged factory girl and it was less than the 'susso'. Ten of those shillings went straight into my mother's hand each week. It was those ten shillings that meant I was pulling my weight in our family. Dad called it 'board'. I was now old enough to pay board to live with the family I had always lived with in my own house. Lessie and Jack were both out of school and paying board so now I had to add my bit. The irony was that with my first pay, Mum had to go and buy me some clothes for work instead of paying off the butcher as she should have. She went out and bought me a pretty pink dress covered with tiny white flowers and little green leaves. The memory of that dress is still vivid, probably because it was bought with my own money and because it was entirely inappropriate, but I loved it just the same.

After letting go of that ten shillings, I had to fork out four and tuppence for my rail fare to work. That left me three and thruppence to myself. Not much, for a forty-hour week. Our hours

were eight to five every day with two ten-minute tea breaks and half an hour for lunch. In the winter, I went to work in the morning in the dark and returned at night in the dark, after spending all day on the line. Not much of a life for a young girl, but what could I expect? At least I had a job.

The reason I had to pay money for train fare instead of tram fare was that we had finally shifted out of awful Hornby Street to a whole house of our own in East Oakleigh. After sharing squalid accommodation in the city, we now lived in what seemed to be a mansion in the country. The house was a typical turn-of-the-century farmhouse with a passage down the middle, rooms galore coming off it and the kitchen in the back. It had a veranda and a big yard with a dunny down the back that the night soil man visited regularly. It was smack dab in the middle of farms. At least it seemed that way to us city kids. There were a few other houses around us, but next to them there were paddocks and further along there were farms. It was on Williams Road just off Neerim Road near Dandenong Road and, it's hard to believe now, but back in 1934, there was hardly anyone there. We had to walk across a large paddock where cows grazed to get to the few shops – a milk bar with a post office attached, a butcher shop and possibly a pub – and to the railway station behind them. At first, we city kids were afraid the cows might attack and try to bite us, but Dad laughed at us so hard we overcame our fears. A bus service came into the street where the shops were and Mum used to drag the babies across that paddock to take the bus to do the shopping in Oakleigh.

My younger brothers and sisters went to the East Oakleigh Primary School. In the mornings, Mum used to get up early to make up the lunches for the whole family before the kids would go off in one direction to school; Lessie, Jack and I would head off in another direction to catch the train to work; and Dad would put clips around the bottoms of his overall legs and hop on his bicycle

to ride off to his, at last, full-time job with the PMG. I remember he was so proud of his bicycle. It was new, fully paid for, and the first transport Dad had owned since he was married. I remember it particularly well because one day I got into terrible trouble over that bike.

Before Dad bought the bike, the only transport any of us had was ‘shank’s ponies’, better known as legs. Now we all wanted learn to ride the bike. Of course, we had to learn when Dad wasn’t around. One day, I convinced Lessie and Jack to teach me to ride the bike. I got on and had a few practices with the boys holding me tight. Then, as I was riding along depending on their help, they suddenly let me go to see how I would do without them. I panicked, wobbled, hit a large rock and tumbled off the bike. When I lifted myself off the ground I saw the new bike lying in a heap with a bent wheel, scratches all over it and mud caked on the handlebars, which had dug themselves into the dirt. Even though I was a scratched and bent-up mess myself, I forgot to cry for sympathy, since I knew I was going to get a punishment I would never forget for what had just happened. The boys didn’t even bother to help me up. When they saw the condition of the bike, they ran for their lives and left me to face the music alone. Actually, I remember the fear of Dad’s wrath more than I do the punishment he gave me. It must have been a whack. Whatever it was, I can see that bike standing on the veranda waiting for Dad to come home as clear as day, as if it all happened yesterday.

Talk about dreams of the good life in some sort of glamorous work and out of school! They were dashed in a twinkling. I remember that by the end of the first day at work, all the excited anticipation I might have had about starting work in a real job was knocked out of me. I knew by lunchtime that I had become a match-factory girl and that it was not such a wonderful thing to be. For a start, with just half the day gone, I was exhausted merely because I had to stand on my feet in one place all morning. I was

dismayed, for I knew the afternoon would be the same, only harder. My legs were aching, my fingers were burnt, my nose raw from the smell of sulphur and, on top of it all, my brain was numb. The workplace was a series of benches, about seven joined together with a girl allocated to each bench. Frames containing rows of matches were banged down on the benches in front of us to work on. Each frame contained, if memory serves me correctly, thirty rows to a frame and sixty matches to a row. My job, and the job of all the other low-paid girls around me, was to box the matches, one row at a time. There was a knack to doing this. We had to run the matches along the line to the end of the row, pick up all sixty matches with one hand and grope for an empty box with the other. After the matches were poured into the box, we had to smooth down the top layer to be able to put the cover on it. Then the filled box was thrown into a large cardboard box that was taken away when it was filled. We always had a wet cloth on hand because sometimes the wax matches would ‘blow’.

‘Fire here!’ we would call as we grabbed the wet cloth to douse the flames.

If it weren’t my frame that was on fire, I would look down the row to see what was happening before I would go straight back to work, for there was no time to linger, and certainly no chance to help. Often our hands would be singed or burnt as we put out the fire. It was hard work because it was tedious. I don’t remember a great deal of talk between us girls on the line. We had to work fast and constantly. Someone was always looking over our shoulders.

Each Friday, after I had forked out my pay in various directions and tried to think what I could do with the three shillings left me, the injustice of such meagre pay would rile me. None of the other girls, who whinged about their lack of funds as much as I did, had any idea that they deserved more, that they were being exploited by merciless bosses because of their vulnerable young age. I don’t know if I was so aware of the exploitation myself at first, but as

time wore on I began to notice that there was a constant rotation of girls working at the benches. When a girl had her sixteenth birthday, she disappeared. I assumed she had been promoted somehow, but pretty soon I twigged that these girls were being 'let go' because they had to be paid more when they turned sixteen. That's wrong! I thought. Social justice was always on my agenda since I had been carefully taught by my father and the comrades in the Socialist Sunday School, and so I began to speak to the other girls about our predicament as the lowest of the low-paid workers. They would listen politely to me, but then argue that there was nothing they could do. They were afraid if they stirred the pot, they would be 'let go' before they were sixteen.

'That's just the way it is, Betty,' they would say. 'You just have to put up with it.'

They thought that when they got older, the experience they were getting at the match factory would allow them to find better jobs. They were sure they weren't going to be match girls forever, they told me.

'Besides, we won't keep working all our lives,' they would cry. 'After all, girls get married and have babies. That's what we're all going to do eventually! So who cares?'

I half believed them, for that was the only feasible future any of us could see for ourselves. Never mind that we never saw any boys from one day to the next and that, at thirteen, I had never even considered having a boyfriend, let alone marrying him. That's just the way it was. Girls got married and had babies. There was no other future. So why grumble about pay and work conditions? Just put up with it... But the idea of ending up like Mum so frightened me that I wasn't going to let go of all of my dreams without a fight.

So, one day, I defied my place in the world. I joined the Manufacturers and Grocers Union. An organiser had come to the factory looking for new members. He had spoken to us during our lunch

break. Even though the union fees were nine pence, I jumped at the chance to join. I came home from work and proudly told my father what I had done, and I could see that he was pleased.

‘So, now if I have any problems on the floor or with my pay, I have someone to turn to,’ I told my father, repeating what the union organiser had told us.

‘That’s right, girl,’ said Dad. ‘When workers have a union behind them, they have a lot more power to change things for the better.’

‘I don’t know how quickly things will change for me,’ I said with a frown on my face. ‘After I joined up and paid my fee, the organiser went up to the office and sat with the bosses. I thought he might be arguing for better pay for us girls, but I saw him take a cigar and put his feet up on the desk.’

‘You reckon he seemed pretty comfortable up there with the bosses, did you?’ asked Dad.

‘Yes. Is that how it’s supposed to be?’

‘Well, my girl,’ my Dad smiled at me, ‘you are learning life’s lessons. Some leaders are good and some are not. I think you’re pretty cluey to have worked out so soon that you are still going to have to look out for yourself.’

‘So, have I done my nine pence?’ I asked in dismay.

‘No, I’m proud of you that you have enough sense to join the union. It’ll still protect you, no matter where you work and no matter who your rep is. Good on you, girl,’ he said, patting my head.

I grinned. I loved it when I pleased Dad. One of my main motivators in life was to seek his approbation.

I was fourteen when I changed jobs and went to work at Kraft Cheese in South Melbourne. For this job, I took the train all the way into Flinders Street Station, right in the centre of the city. The station was a busy and exciting place for a young girl who had rarely made it past the boundaries of the shambling working-class suburbs. All the trains in the city ended their journeys at this sta-

tion, and so did all the country trains. There were people galore from all walks of life rushing to and fro, up and down the ramps, up and down the stairs, stopping to pick up newspapers from the boys crying out the headlines or checking the clocks above the steps or slipping past the ticket man. Ladies in beautiful clothes strutted past men in overalls. Boys ran messages for men in double-breasted suits, who wore freshly brushed fedoras and shiny shoes, and who carried fine leather briefcases. Working girls in stylish dresses made their way to shops where they were clerks or to offices where they were secretaries. Young men in argyle vests and baggy pleated pants with their hair freshly combed and slicked down tried to chat up the girls when they stopped to check their make-up with little hand mirrors they pulled from their smart handbags. Little did I know that these girls weren't really much better off than I was, and that their clothes were all bought on lay-by and made of the cheapest material. I thought they were gorgeous and I keenly felt how dowdy I looked, a factory girl dressed in faded clothes rushing toward Princes Bridge to get to work on time. New fantasies of nice clothes and a better life spun around in my head as a result of the glimpses I caught of all these people I had never known even existed before I began riding on the train to Flinders Street. I'll be one of those girls one day, I thought, and pictured myself sitting in a little tea shop with a friend, sipping tea and nibbling daintily on a sugary bun, taking no notice of the boys watching me.

Once I was out of the station, I walked across the Yarra River on the Princes Street Bridge and my fantasies always changed gear. I would stop for a moment in the middle of the bridge and watch the river slowly flowing down to meet the sea in Port Phillip Bay. I felt a longing I didn't understand. The water moving under me symbolised something for me, but I couldn't have told you then that the river was escape; the river was the future; the river was the world to be discovered. The idea of having choices and making changes were only vague shadows in my fourteen-year-old

imagination, so when I looked at the river, it mesmerised me but I didn't know why. I only knew that the dull ache of longing always stopped me in my tracks when I crossed the bridge on the way to work every morning.

The Kraft Cheese factory didn't make only cheese. My job, with six other girls just like me working together at a conveyor belt, was to inspect the labels on the cans that were full of baked beans, or sometimes spaghetti. The cans would come past us on the belt and we would grab the ones whose labels were on crooked or backwards or wrinkled and place them in a box behind us. Since the work was not dangerous, nor did it require thought or skill, we girls found a way to do the work and talk to each other at the same time. We became friends. At tea breaks we used to sneak out the back to smoke cigarettes because we considered it was the smart thing to do. We thought we were Betty Bourgeois sitting behind the factory smoking our Black and Whites or our 3X3's in the red packets. Each packet cost us thruppence. Sometimes we would buy a packet of Craven A, which were more expensive, because the advertising said they were supposed to be better for you. We would smoke and gossip about boys we knew or would like to know, or we might talk about who we thought was kissing who or, even more to the point, what it might be like to kiss so-and-so. I didn't add much to these conversations since I didn't know any boys besides my brothers, and kissing was something I had never experienced. Sometimes the girls would say knowing things about tongues and lips that made me wonder if I ever wanted the experience. Soon the bell would ring marking the end of tea break and we would moan in disgust as we took long last draws on our precious cigarettes before butting them out on the brick wall we were leaning on at the back of the factory.

'Oh, God, doesn't this give you the horrors,' we would say as we made our way back to the conveyor belt and two more hours non-stop of inspecting can after can after can.

One day, just as we were getting back into the swing of the conveyor belt after our break, a man in a white coat came along carrying a clipboard. He placed himself behind us girls all standing in a row and just stood there watching us. I tell you, it made us feel very creepy to have him there. Every once in a while he would write something down on his clipboard. This made us nervous and we put our heads down and tried to look like we were concentrating on our jobs, that we were possibly quite efficient at it and that maybe we were even enjoying what we were doing. At one point I had the distinct impression that the conveyor belt began to move a bit quicker than usual. I snuck a look at the other girls, but none of them seemed to notice. They were concentrating on looking like perfect little employees. I didn't want to seem out of step, so I put my head down and worked as hard as they did. I was sure we were working faster and faster, harder and harder, as time went by but no one said a thing. The man standing behind us made no comment. There was not any acknowledgement that he even realised we were anything but part of the machinery. He kept making notes and I began to feel more and more uncertain of myself, sure that he was there to catch us out and find a reason to fire one of us. I didn't want to be the one 'let go', so I worked harder, frowning with concentration until, finally, the bell rang and the shift was over. The man capped his pen, tucked his clipboard under his arm and walked away without a second glance.

'What was that all about?' we asked each other as we punched our timecards, exited the factory and lit up our last cigarette for the day, since none of us could risk being caught smoking by our parents.

'I don't know, but I hope I never see him again.'

'Did you think the cans were coming by us faster than ever?' someone asked and I was glad I wasn't the only one who thought so.

'Maybe. All I know is I sure as hell have a headache after an

afternoon of some creep looking at the back of my neck and not telling me why,' said one girl a bit older than the rest of us who had the courage to swear as if she did it every day. I'll bet she never has the courage to speak like that in front of her parents, I thought.

We finished our smokes and passed around mint lollies to hide the smell of tobacco on our breaths and parted from each other for home. At dinner that night, I told Dad about the strange man watching us at work. I told him how the man seemed to frighten us into working harder than we ever had and that the conveyor belt seemed to be getting faster and faster, 'Just like in that Charlie Chaplin movie where he works in the big factory and the machinery goes out of control,' I said. 'It felt like that.'

Dad looked at me aghast.

'Didn't you know he was a time and motion expert?' he said. 'From now on you'll be expected to keep up that pace all the time. They have tricked you into speeding up production! Have they offered you more pay? Of course not! Well, there's another lesson for you, my girl. Exploitation of the workers!'

I was horrified. Back at work, we girls talked over what Dad had said and we agreed he was right. We were being exploited.

'Next time that bloke comes around to stare at us, we'll slow down instead of speeding up and then see what he does,' said the older girl who was good at swearing.

Other girls agreed, but I thought it might be a dangerous plan of action for we might all be fired. I told them I was in the union. The more united we were, the more power we would have, I told them. Several of the girls decided to join, although many of my co-workers were sceptical of my idealism and merely shook their heads as they headed back in to work after the break. Maybe they were right to shake their heads. Not much changed for us young girls on the line. We soon got used to working faster.