

ONE, TWO, THREE, STUFF!!

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Eeeeearnt! Eeeeearnt! Eeeeearnt! Ugh. That's the sound to which I woke up every day this summer at 6:30. How annoying! For some reason, no matter how hot it was outside, it was always freezing when I made my first attempt to roll out of bed. Therefore I usually had to force myself to get out of my warm comfortable waterbed, and fumble around for my glasses. My next tasks were to get dressed in fifteen minutes, jump in the car, pick up my friend, and make it to work by 7:00. I did all of this every morning this summer just to earn forty dollars a day.

I worked at a place called Mailways Enterprises. Mailways is a factory in which there are a number of different jobs. One job, and the most boring, was to sit at a table and stuff mail by hand. At another, we had to stand by a machine and feed it box after box of envelopes that needed to be sealed and stamped. Yet another exciting job was to sit and sort mail by zip code. (After a while the numbers seemed to run together and many times, some piles would get messed up.) Finally, the best job of all was to stand by a machine that automatically stuffed mail and make sure that all the pockets on the machine were filled with the letters that were being stuffed. This job also included making sure that the machine worked properly, and it usually didn't. Everything usually went well until my hands began to cramp up from doing the same motion over and over again about 4000 times a day. By the fifth hour of the day, it got very boring, and I would pray for the lunch break to come, because that would leave only three more hours of monotonous work.

Many days I sat at a table the entire day and had to keep up the continuous rhythm of . . . one, two, three, stuff! One, two, three, stuff! One, two, three, stuff! Other days, it could get extremely nerve racking working at one of the machines. Imagine having eight stacks of brochures, and each stack getting smaller and smaller at a different rate. It was my job to make sure that none of the piles ran out of brochures (not to mention that the stacks couldn't be stacked extremely high because then they would cause a breakdown.). All eight brochures were in eight different boxes behind me, so I had to keep turning around to find the brochures that I needed. If that doesn't sound nerve racking, the catch was that every other or every third time that I turned around, the whole machine would get messed up, papers would fly everywhere, and lights would go off above each stack. Sometimes it looked Christmas with all the red lights! After about an hour of this, it got pretty old, but all I had to remember was that I had one hour down, seven more to go!

During these stressful times, we had to do something that would help us through the rest of the day. We basically had two options--having a rubberband fight or talking to someone when the supervisor left for a minute or two. The rubberband fights could only go on for so long before they got boring, and so, sooner or later, we had to resort to our second option. The only problem with talking was that they tried to separate us as much as possible to make us "more productive." It usually didn't work, though. We still managed to get a lot of talking done.

I can't believe some of the things we talked about. A lot of it was just plain gossip about who was sleeping with whom in the factory, or who liked whom. That part made it interesting, but I also learned a lot about the women who worked there, and what kind of lives they lived away from our small family at Mailways. One lady named Alice had been working there for seven years already, and she did the same job day after day. I couldn't imagine anyone doing that. I was already bored by just working there a few weeks. I couldn't wait for the summer to end to get out of there.

Another woman who worked there was named Teri. She was the sister-in-law of the man who owned Mailways. She was just another one of the fat ladies who worked there, until one day when she told us about her life. Her husband had been arrested about two years before right there at Mailways for selling crack in the parking lot to an undercover cop. I was told that the cops surrounded the building like one of those drug raids that we see in the movies, and they arrested him (there were even guys on the roof). I couldn't believe it. Here I thought that I was just working at a normal factory, but to my surprise, the place actually had some unusual history. Teri, it turns out, is still married to him, and has to raise their children plus work eight hours a day at Mailways in order to have any money.

Many of the other women, after working an eight hour day, complained about having to go home to a house full of screaming kids and having to put up with them for the remainder of the night. I can't believe that they did this. I was so exhausted after work that I would go home, take a nap for a few hours, and then try to go out with my friends. We would try to do something, but I was usually so exhausted that I would just want to go home and sleep. On Fridays, I couldn't wait to get out of the factory because I would have two days to rest. I learned that most of the ladies, though, went in on Saturdays also to work an extra eight hours. This was just to earn a little extra money. I don't know how they did it.

One of the ladies was named Theresa. She was twenty-four years old, short, and had blond hair that was always in a ponytail and bangs that were curled up. She dressed the way we did in the mid 80's by wearing pink tights or rolling her jeans. She was also an airhead, and therefore we usually had to repeat directions to her about three times before she actually understood them. At first she wouldn't talk to us. We found out that this was because her husband was out of work and she was petrified that if she talked, she would be fired. She had applied to many places for work, and this was the only one that would hire her. Every day after dropping her off for work, her husband would go off and try to find a job. She kept implying that it wasn't going too well. Her goals at work were to work hard and do everything right. Therefore, this usually meant not talking to us. One day though, she got talkative and told us more about her life. It turns out that she got pregnant during high school and never went back to school. The son she had was given up to adoption because the man left her and she didn't have the money to deal with it. Then she met her husband and they had a son of their own. It was really hard for her to work all day and then go home to her family, but she managed to do it. I couldn't have felt worse hearing all of this. There I was, just working there for the summer, not really caring if they fired me or not, plus I

was going away to school on a scholarship within the next month. I was leaving them so that I could continue my education and not end up having a job like they had at Mailways.

I learned a lot about life from the women who would bother to tell me their life stories. This experience showed me why I was going to school and why I was studying so hard to get good grades. I know that I don't want to end up working in a place like that doing the same thing day after day after day. I got bored doing that this summer and I can't imagine doing it year after year.

I never really knew that much about factory work except for the horror stories that my grandparents and parents had told me. Now I know that you can't really understand the concept of "one, two, three, stuff" until you've done it yourself. It's not just the work, though. It's the environment, the people, the things you hear, the things you do. One thing I realized was how the people there are like one big family. They were sad to see me leave, because they knew that I wouldn't be coming back, and they knew that I was going out in the world to make something of myself. They didn't let this bother them, though. They actually idolized me and said how they wished that they were in my shoes. They were excited and proud of me for not wanting to have a life like theirs.