

It was my birthday, Monday the 9<sup>th</sup> November 1959. I'd just turned fifteen. Now at last I could legally get a job and earn my own money. My mum and dad weren't well off, so I hated having to ask them for everything. Woolworth's was my first choice but you had to be fifteen and three months to work for them. A few years earlier I'd learned the hard way, if you don't try you don't get<sup>1</sup>, so after school that day I decided to do something about getting a job. It was a long way to my home from Victoria where I got off the number 11 bus, but instead of catching the 24 to Pimlico, I decided to walk and go into every shop on the way to ask if they needed a Saturday girl.



The first place I tried was the department store Parnell's. Next door to the New Victoria cinema, which I think is now a theatre, this store stretched for ages along the road. It was the only shop I knew which was so big that it had two front doors. You could walk right through from Wilton Road out to Vauxhall Bridge Road on the other side. (I think the shop's name across the top was in a dull, mustard yellow. If anyone reading this remembers, please let me know. I don't remember ever seeing bright colours on buildings in those days.)

I was a bit nervous about going in because to me it always looked so snobby. Telling myself, 'What the hell. You won't know till you try.' and wiping my palms on my school skirt, I took a deep breath and pushed open the door. When the snooty assistant I asked told me they didn't want to 'employ' me, I thought, 'Oh well. They don't know what they're missing. They probably think they're too posh to take on a 15 year old schoolgirl just for Saturdays.' How was I to know Parnell's was soon to close down only to reopen some time later as a huge Woolworth's?

Along the road I tried them all: dress shops, ironmongers, estate agents and stationers. They all turned me down. No-one was interested in having a plump, dark haired teenager working for them until, halfway home, crossing my fingers behind my back, I went into a flower shop. The smell was gorgeous and there was colour everywhere. I could have jumped for joy when the owner said she was only too pleased to have some help. Yay. I had a job and could start the very next Saturday morning. It's funny how getting up to go to work and earn money was easier than getting up to go to school.

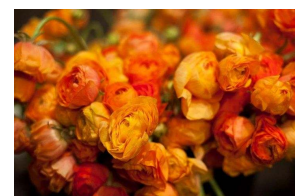
So began my love of flowers and plants. I was so into it, I can't even remember what my boss looked like never mind her name. Asked to work during the Christmas holidays, not only meant I had even more of my own money to spend, I didn't care about not going out.



Gerberas

Working here was brilliant - filling big silver buckets with water then unpacking the big, flat boxes which my boss brought back from the market. Would it be roses I was taking out (watch out for thorns) or huge orange, pink or white Gerberas? Maybe this box would contain red, pink or

white Carnations and red or orange Ranuncula (still one of my favourites) or even the greens of branches of Box with its tiny leaves or fronds of different, delicate ferns. Once they were all in water I'd arrange the buckets round the shop together with pots of growing plants like Cyclamen and Azaleas. Best of all, when we weren't busy I learned how to make buttonholes, bouquets and wreaths. It really was my dream job.



Ranuncula

But dreams can't all be good. Sometimes you have a nightmare. Mine came at Christmas. Due to some freak of weather (or it may have been greedy birds) holly branches had no natural berries that year. So I had to twist artificial red berries between vicious, spiky, prickly holly leaves, scratching my arms, wrists and every inch of my hands - fingers, thumbs, backs and palms. None got missed. All got very sore. But soothing cream and my pleasure in working with natural flowers with their soft, downy petals, helped me get over it.

Times must've been hard in those days because, like Parnell's, my boss had to close her shop. By then though, I was older than the basic age for Woolworth's, so who to work for next was a no-brainer. Parnell's hadn't yet been taken over, so the nearest Woolies to my home in Churchill Gardens was in Tottenham Court Road. The 24 bus, which stopped round the corner from our flat, took me all the way there. Easy for me to get to, this was where I went work next. See the Woolworth's entry if you want to know more.



By the way, my love of flowers has stayed with me all my life. What I learned all those years ago has given me the knowledge to make fancy bouquets as well as those for weddings, buttonholes and arrangements for funerals. And I always have plants or cut flowers in my home.

<sup>1</sup> My 'if you don't try you don't get' lesson was at a youth club. No-one called out the answer to a quiz question and although I was sure I knew it, I was worried about getting it wrong and looking a fool. Instead of saying it out loud to the club leader, I whispered it to my friend. When the club leader told us the answer, and I'd been right, I piped up, "That's what I told my friend." He answered, "Well, you should've told me then." I learned a lesson more valuable than the prize I missed out on which would've been half-a-crown, worth two shillings and sixpence in old money; in today's money, the grand sum of 12½p.