

No more perfumed flower shop aromas but dry, musty smells behind the counters of Woolworth's. Compared to the bright colours I'd been used to, this place was dull: dark brown walls and counters. Even the clothes they sold were more pastel shades than vivid. (Bright coloured Mary Quant type outfits hadn't arrived here yet.) The only counter with any colour on it was the one selling sweets, which I was really aware of as they'd been rationed when I was little. There were colourful gob-stoppers, pear drops and cough candy and packs in bright wrappers like KitKat, Smarties and Fruit gums. It's amazing how many of them are still around today.



It didn't take long before I stopped noticing the decor and nasty niffs. I was too busy. In my last job I'd had lots of time to learn new things but here I was on the go all the time, either serving or getting more stock to replace what I'd sold. I love to talk to people so it was great having so many customers and work mates to chat with whilst I was working and at break times.

After helping out on different counters to learn the ropes, I was put in charge of paint. I was in my element arranging displays of tins to show the different colours of their contents, balancing them out with brushes and other tools of the trade.

Three things stick in my mind from my days working for Woolies. One was sussing out that if I smiled to my first customer of the day, they'd give the smile back. Once I had it on my face it was ready to give away again. It works with friends, relatives and even some, but not all, strangers, so I've tried to keep it (mostly successfully, but not always) in my daily life since then.

The second of these things was embarrassing. In my teens when I was talking to someone with an accent, sometimes without thinking I replied the same way.<sup>1</sup> Anyway, when a tubby Northern gentleman asked, "E lass. 'Ave you got this coolla paynt?" I replied, "E, I down't knowow." (Please excuse the spellings. It's difficult to write in an accent.) As soon as the words were out of my mouth I

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<sup>1</sup> I once had an animated discussion with a friend with both of us talking with Scottish accents. Although born in Scotland, she'd lost her accent and usually spoke as I did, like a Londoner. It was only when she got excited about something, as she did this time, that she slipped back. But as soon as she did, I did too. As soon as we realised we got the giggles and forgot what we'd been on about.

realised what I'd done and ducked behind the counter, only coming back out when my cheeks had gone back to their normal colour. After that I only replied to him in grunts so that he didn't hear how I really spoke.

The third and final (treasured) memory was of two hunky, dark haired guys speaking to me in Italian. When I said I couldn't understand them, one turned to the other and said "Bella come Italiana." which I guessed (and my present day Google translator confirmed) meant 'As beautiful as an Italian girl.' Blushing (I did it frequently in those days) I pretended I had no idea what they'd said.

Other things that happened back then are blurred. I know that's where I started smoking ciggies. Wanting to appear as grown up as the others who worked at Woolie's I'd take a fag when they offered their packs round during breaks in the canteen. Then I started to feel guilty, only ever taking and not offering back. Once I got into the habit of buying what I now know to be evil weeds, I was hooked. But in those days no-one knew it was harmful to health. (I knew of someone told to smoke by her doctor to calm her nerves.) Completely hooked by the time I found out how bad smoking was, I puffed coffin nails for years. But I'm pleased to say I've given up now and haven't had a fag for over 20 years.

Working at Woolworth's kept me in pocket money through the rest of my time at school to when I left college at 17. After that it was 9am to 5.30pm, Monday to Friday at my first full-time job at Burroughs Machines Ltd. If you want to know more about that, you'll have to read the next entry.

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