

I was a 19 year old girl working in a nearly all-male office. How brilliant was that? The only other females in Quantity Surveyor, Basil Cohen's office in South Kensington were Miss Weiss the secretary, ancient to me but in looking back probably only about 50, and the occasional temp.

Being the Receptionist and manning the switchboard, I sat in a bright, airy, smart entrance lobby. Although my desk was against a wall, it didn't feel cramped 'cos of the space everywhere else. Of the five offices which led off the lobby, the three smallest ones were next to each other on the other side of the wide space on my left.

Mr. Levy's was the first on the right as you walked in. One of the senior Quantity Surveyors, he was a tall, friendly, portly man who was often in the lobby in front of my desk chatting to clients. If he wasn't there or in his office, he'd probably gone through the door opposite his, into the large general office on the other side of the wall on my right. This was where most of the younger, all male Quantity Surveyors (both qualified and trainees) worked. (Flirting and chatting with them as they passed me and on the 'phone during the day, was a perk of the job.) Behind me, at the far end of the lobby, was Basil Cohen's big office.

Miss Wiess had one of the other two smaller offices. Tiny with brown hair and curly perm, I didn't have much to do with her. Her door, usually closed, was level with my desk. In the other office between her's and the boss' was another Mr. Cohen, also a senior Quantity Surveyor. (I don't think the two Mr. Cohens were related. Having the name Cohen when you're Jewish is a bit like being Smith when you're English or Patel when you're Indian.)

This Mr Cohen's first name was Desmond, but I didn't dare use it. In those days you called senior staff by their titles. Taller and slimmer than the boss, he spoke as if he had a plum in his mouth, which sometimes made it difficult for me to understand his audio tapes. (For example, I pronounce Pall Mall with soft sounding 'a' in the middle. He used to say it as Paul Maul.) His very glamorous, actress wife didn't often visit her husband at work, but when she did it was amazing how many of the guys in the general office needed to see me about something.

Although the boss was stricter with me than anyone else, it didn't bother me. (One of the temps actually asked how I put up with him.) Don't ask how I knew, but I realised that he actually favoured me, perhaps because we were both Jewish, but he went too far the other way to prove that he didn't - if you get my meaning. Anyway, other than having a bit more hair, the way he acted and looked reminded me of my cuddly, not too tall dad.



But I did more than greet customers, answer 'phones, audio type and flirt. Being fussy, I enjoyed proof-reading complicated Bills of Quantity but first I had to calculate the figures and check them too. Before you think I must've been a genius, I did use machines. The easiest calculator to use was an Olivetti. Unlike the one in the picture, our's had its own stand that looked a bit like an old lady's walking frame with a gap for knees to fit under. This was kept in an upstairs office out of clients' sight and if we had a rush job I'd use a different machine so a temp could use this one.

One of the temps was a lovely, mumsy African lady by the name of Titti. Ebony skin with frizzy hair cut close to her scalp, she had tribal cuts on both cheeks. Once when I was out at lunch, I saw her on the other side of the busy road. It was only when I called out

"Hey Titti" loudly and got weird looks from people, that I realised how her name sounded. The old red cheeks struck again.

Lunch times in the canteen I played cards with guys from the general office. One of them, back from a few weeks in Saudi Arabia, tanned, with blonde locks most girls would die for, invited all the younger staff, including me, to his flat to see his holiday slides. (Digital cameras weren't around in those days.) My boyfriend Paul (who, by the way, my mother absolutely hated) was really snotty about me being on my own with so many men, so I got the ok for him to come too.

As the only girl, I had the honour of sitting in the one armchair in the flat's tiny front room. The men sat around and behind me on dining room or folding chairs, stools and even boxes. Our host offered me a choice of drinks - gin and tonic or brandy and dry ginger. I'd only ever drunk cider or shandy so hadn't a clue about spirits. When I chose brandy, he half filled a tumbler with golden liquid, then topped it up with a fizzy drink the same colour. I was thirsty. The drink tasted good. As the lights dimmed and the slide show began, my drink went down quickly.



All I can recall of the slides is camels and golden sand. My first drink finished, I was offered the same choice for a second. I chose gin and tonic to find out what that tasted like. Again my tumbler was half filled, this time with a clear liquid then topped up with a different, also clear, fizzy one. Looking like water, my second drink went down quickly too. Slide show? What slide show?

I liked the brandy best so when I was offered a third drink, that's what I chose. Three drinks isn't much is it? The slides finished, my glass empty, it was time to go home. When Paul and one of the other guys put their hands under my elbows to help me stand up from the armchair, I asked "What on earth are you doing?" They replied, "You'll see." When we reached the bottom of the stairs, the front door opened, the fresh air hit me in the face and my knees gave way. I understood.



I don't remember the journey home but Paul got me to the entrance to Shelley House and called the lift. Force of habit made me stagger in when it arrived. Paul then reached in, pressed the fourth floor button and not having the guts to face my mum, ran off leaving me to travel up on my own. Again habit took over when the lift door opened and I lurched to my front door and pressed the bell. To my mum's "Whatever's wrong?" as she opened the door, I managed "Nothing. I'm just tired." then pushed past her, went into my bedroom and shut the door. All I wanted was my bed, but when I tried to lie down the room

started spinning so fast I felt sick. I've no idea how long I had to walk round and round in the tiny space before being able to lie down.

Looking back I can only count my lucky stars. It could've been a lot worse. No-one took advantage of me. The guys probably thought it funny to get me blotto, but feeling a fool, I was really grateful none of them said anything about it when I next saw them.

Needless to say, Paul didn't last much longer as my boyfriend. Before I left a couple of years later, I'd met and married Tony. Basil Cohen advised me on the best place to buy our first home and the staff gave me a brilliant wedding present of an alarm clock which woke us up with a light before sounding a noise. But that's another story for another time.

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