

My baby was due Christmas Day but she didn't want to wait till then. Just after midnight on Christmas Eve my husband Tony drove me to Westminster Hospital. At half past two that afternoon I gave birth to Mara. With a mass of dark hair, which turned out to be curly like her father's, I fell in love with her instantly.

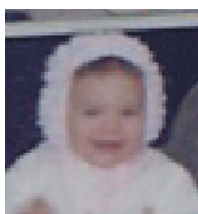
When we woke up the next day the ward had been decorated and the nurses were wearing Christmas cracker paper hats. To the trumpeting of party horns as they unrolled, the babies were brought into the ward. Each tiny crib had a fat stocking at the end, with a cracker sticking out of the top. Happy oohs and aahs sounded round the ward as us new mums unwrapped the presents: a make-up bag for each of us and a matinee jacket and bonnet for our baby, in pink or blue depending on whether we'd had a boy or a girl.

Obviously I'd bought Christmas presents in advance. Among these was a box of cigars for my father. Why should that stick in my mind? Well, when my dad came to visit the first thing he said to me was "Guess what?"

"I've no idea. What?"

"I've given up smoking."

As you can imagine, I was gutted. But I found out later my dad had given up so the place would be smoke free when we went to stay with my parents when Mara and I came out of hospital. It was three months before we finally went back to our house in Romford. Having got used to being with my mum during the day, I was lonely at home whilst Tony was at work. Although I loved being with my baby, I missed adult company. Then I had a brainwave - I looked through the local telephone directory for names which sounded Jewish. My logic was that as I'd been brought up in that faith, I could use it to start a conversation. I did find a lady who invited me to her home, but after a couple of visits we both realised we didn't really have anything in common.



Then I struck lucky. Whilst at the doctor's waiting for Mara's turn at the baby vaccination surgery, a young woman of about my age, waiting with her strawberry-blond haired baby, said the pastel pink, loopy bonnet my daughter was wearing was gorgeous. I was really chuffed and proudly told her I'd made it. When she replied "Oh, I wish I could knit." I offered to teach her and we swapped names.

Jenny's baby Jane was called in first and Jenny waited outside till Mara had her jabs. Afterwards at a local shop, Jenny bought knitting needles and lemon wool, then we went back to my place for the first lesson. To cut a long story short, Jenny never did learn. Instead she cleverly (her word when she read this) persuaded me to make a similar bonnet for Jane. Jenny's straight hair's now shorter and fairer than it was in those days, and (surprise, surprise) she's still not taller than me, but we're still friends over 45 years later.

Jenny turned out to be thoughtful too as having told her I'd once dreamed of being a beautician, she told me when she saw an advert asking for beautician trainees. It had been put in by two friends, who'd just started a company calling it Rogene - a

combination of their names. Jean, a tall, slim lady, had been the chief beautician at Innox. She, and Rhoda her shorter and plumper accountant friend, had heard about Holiday Magic beauty products: foundations, blushers, cleansers, moisturisers, etc., tested them and found them to be really good. The plan was that Jean would teach students the skills they'd need to give treatments: cleansing, face massage, eyebrow shaping and even full make-ups and get them to sell products at the same time.

I enjoyed finding out about the skin and how to care for it as much as visiting and treating customers. Even better, no-one minded if I took Mara with me in her pram during the day. Tony didn't mind baby-sitting some evenings which meant I could do house parties, something Tupperware had just made popular. A fun way to spend an evening with friends even if you didn't buy anything, loads of my customers wanted to hold them in their homes and I enjoyed doing them too. We'd play some games, I'd chat about the skin and the best way to care for it, give samples to the guests, a free facial to the hostess for holding the party, and hopefully take orders for some of the stuff I'd shown them and book treatments and more parties.

Another way of earning with Holiday Magic was to get customers to sell products to their friends. By adding their orders to our own we increased our commission which in turn bumped up Jean and Rhoda's money as all our orders went through them. This sounded like a good idea but it was pyramid selling, which was made illegal some time later. Holiday Magic could only be sold this way so Rhoda and Jean had to stop selling it. They did start making their own products but I can't find anything about Rogene online now, so I reckon they probably gave up.

By then it didn't matter to me as I was pregnant again. (Tony and I were both only children and didn't want the same thing for Mara.) Our second daughter was born at home three years and nine months after her sister. I wanted her name to be Barbi-Gill but Tony thought this was a nickname, so when he registered her he put Barbara Gill on her birth certificate. She's over 40 now but I still call her Barbi.

Not only did Tony and I miss the extra cash when I wasn't working, I missed the daytime company you get with a job. So when Barbi was six months old and our next-door neighbour offered to look after her, I jumped at the chance.

One of the offices I went to as a temp had a National 32 which no-one had been able to get to work properly. But with me being a Mrs Know-it-all with this type of contraption, I sussed out what was wrong. After I reprogrammed it to do what it was supposed to do they offered me a full-time job but I turned it down.

This company's boss is worth a mention though. A short, fat, self-important man, he made his staff use cardboard for taking rough notes. When it was covered they had to pull thin layers off to remove the writing and leave blank cardboard again. It only got thrown away when it was too flimsy to take any more layers off. Considered then to be a skinflint, nowadays he'd be the ultimate in recycling.

The temp work kept me up-to-date with using machines like the Sensimatic and the National 32. When I felt ready for a full-time job I started work at Lee, Meredith, an Advertising Agency. If you've read this far, you must know the ropes by now so I'll sign off and see you in the next entry.

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