



JAMES CARROLL

Readers Write

NINE TO FIVE

I GOT MY FIRST REAL JOB IN HIGH school, working on the assembly line for the Sears catalog: sixty-five cents an hour, nearly twice what I'd been getting for baby-sitting. Despite my excitement, I also felt apprehensive. Among the hundreds of workers, I was the only foreign face. It was 1944. A Japanese American, I was only seven months out of an Arizona internment camp. My family was one of thousands interned in early 1942 for "national-security reasons." (Not one of us was ever found guilty of sabotage or espionage.) Now the war was still going on, but the news from Europe and the Pacific was optimistic. People felt the end was in sight, and victory was assured for our side.

At work, the *clickety-clack* of printing presses and the oily smell of ink permeated the air. My job was to assemble catalogs, slipping pages into sequence. My co-workers and I wore rubber finger

protectors and were cautious of paper cuts.

I worked at a table with nine other girls, all Irish, Italian, or Polish Catholics. They didn't seem to care that I looked different. Because our work was mindless, we gossiped and joked the entire time. Every Friday morning, at least one of them would talk about the hot date she had that night.

When summer ended, I returned to high school, where I was a misfit. The other students spoke articulately and wore expensive clothes. I missed the *joie de vivre* of my catalog co-workers, their street smarts and earthiness.

*Aiko Uyeki
McKinleyville, California*

WHEN I WAS IN COLLEGE IN 1970, I got a summer job with a major international firm in London. I had no idea what the company did, but I was excited to be

living abroad, and my co-workers immediately made me feel welcome.

On my first day I discovered that my job involved shipping thousands of weapons around the world. I checked, copied, and filed shipping lists for more kinds of guns and ammunition than I'd ever known existed. The documents listed manufacturers such as Remington and Colt, along with quantity and destination. I noticed an especially large number of African countries on the shipping lists. Who was receiving these weapons? Who would be shot by them? I tried not to think of the human cost, but I knew that wherever weapons were shipped, misery and pain would follow.

At the end of the summer, I was sad to say goodbye to my co-workers, who'd been generous and kind to me. If the work had been different, I never would have wanted to leave. I still wonder how

such friendly people settled on a career of shipping arms.

*Ramie Streng
Ashland, Oregon*

I'D HAD IT WITH TEACHING. I WORKED with "difficult" kids and was never sure how much I'd accomplished. I wanted a physical job where I could see the fruits of my labor and wouldn't bring the work home with me.

So I took a job delivering packages. I wore a brown uniform and carried a clipboard. At first I enjoyed the work, especially returning at the end of the day with an empty truck. But then my supervisor began to time me, insisting I drive faster and deliver more packages. I also realized that most of the packages contained junk that people would be better off without. I began to miss teaching, in particular the look on a kid's face when he or she finally figured out how to divide fractions or walk away from a fight.

One day I delivered several boxes of textbooks to a junior high school. I was standing at the principal's desk with my clipboard, waiting for him to get off the phone. "Where in God's name," he said into the receiver, "am I going to find a certified special-education teacher two months into the school year?"

I gave him his answer.

*Dennis Donoghue
Rowley, Massachusetts*

IN THE CARNIVAL-LIKE WORLD OF Hollywood, I was a set painter. Traditionally this was considered a man's job, but affirmative action had forced studios to hire more minorities and women.

The work was physically demanding, toxic, and dirty. I ran along scaffolding lugging gallons of paint, covered thousands of square feet in varnish, sanded acres of wood, and marbled dance floors for Michael Jackson. I hung plaid wallpaper as fast as I could, standing on a ladder surrounded by sweaty men wielding chop saws and drills. When my hair became stiff with lacquer after endless days of spraying, I cut it off.

But the biggest challenge in those early years was sexual politics. One of my bosses joked with me, in front of about twenty leering co-workers, "Which hotel

are we going to for lunch, girlie?" The other men would make innuendoes and crass remarks, burping and cussing loudly whenever I was around.

Our first sexual-harassment-awareness meeting was attended by forty angry, confused men afraid for their livelihoods, and one woman: me. I wanted to become invisible. But after that, attitudes began to shift. Pornography disappeared from toolboxes. I was no longer afraid to tell my co-workers when something they did made me feel uncomfortable. Through hard work, humor, and understanding, I earned their respect.

I've since learned that new hires are always the brunt of jokes and cruel remarks: a sort of tough guy's welcome wagon. When I realized this, I felt as if I'd found the key to understanding this strange male universe. It's unfortunate that most of the jokes they made with me were based on sex and gender, but I think it was the best they could come up with at the time.

*Felisa Finn
Santa Monica, California*

WITH A NEWLY MINTED DOCTORATE in social science, a young daughter to support, and no job prospects, I had to take the first job I was offered: a swing shift at a Brussels-sprouts cannery. I worked 4 p.m. to midnight.

My first night I got motion sickness watching the Brussels sprouts bounce down the conveyor belts, and I barely made it to the bathroom in time. The factory nurse dosed me with Dramamine, and I went back to the line.

Except for a French woman named Dominique and me, the line workers were all Latinas. They spoke only Spanish on the line, while the supervisors, or *major-domas*, who were white women, spoke only English. My Spanish was very limited, but because my mother had taught choir in a Hispanic elementary school in Texas, I could sing a lot of old, sentimental Mexican songs.

Gringas like Dominique and me had to fill at least nineteen boxes per minute on the line, or we'd be fired. Our Latina friends had to fill twenty-three. Why the

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Because of space limitations, we're unable to print all the submissions we receive. We edit pieces, often quite heavily, but contributors have the opportunity to approve or disapprove of editorial changes prior to publication. (If you don't want to be contacted regarding the editing of your work, please let us know.)

We publish only nonfiction in Readers Write. Feel free to submit your work under "Name Withheld" if it allows you to be more honest, but be sure to include your mailing address so we can give you a complimentary six-month subscription if we use your work, as a way of saying thanks. Occasionally we will choose not to publish an author's name, or will use only a first name and last initial. While we don't question the truthfulness of the writing, we must be sensitive to considerations of libel or invasion of privacy. If you've already changed the names of the people involved, please say so.

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UPCOMING TOPICS	DEADLINE	PUBLICATION DATE
Too Close For Comfort	December 1	May 2007
The Bedroom	January 1	June 2007
Guns	February 1	July 2007
Change Of Heart	March 1	August 2007
Rivals	April 1	September 2007
Telling The Truth	May 1	October 2007

double standard? A co-worker explained: "You don't have as much practice doing things with your hands as we do."

"Except for putting on nail polish, or talking on your princess phones," another chimed in. They laughed while I puffed up inside with righteous, proletarian anger.

One night during a thunderstorm the power went out, leaving us standing in the dark on the iron gratings by the silent lines. Managers and *majordomas* herded us upstairs to sit and wait until the power was restored. I don't know why, but as we waited I started to sing one of my mom's favorite songs: "Sin ti, no podre vivir jamas, y pensar que nunca mas. . . ." The hall fell silent. I sang all three tragic verses. After I'd finished, the lights came back on, and my *compañeras* began clapping; several had tears in their eyes. One told me she hadn't heard that song since she was a little girl.

Later, on our "lunch" break, Dominique and I took our usual place at the end of the *majordomas'* picnic bench, but then a small delegation of line workers came over and firmly escorted me to their table. "Now," one of them said, "you're gonna sit with us!"

*Mischa B. Adams
Santa Cruz, California*

I SPENT THIRTY-FIVE YEARS AS A family physician, working long hours and attending to generations of families. My patients trusted me and talked openly about their lives. I attended births and deaths and checked on acutely ill patients in the hospital twice a day. On Saturday mornings my office was closed, but patients who had concerns or were depressed would come by anyway to talk. House calls and nursing-home visits were part of my daily schedule.

Gradually medicine changed. I joined an HMO and worked nine to five on weekdays and only one Saturday morning a month, with no hospital duties and no house calls. No longer did all members of a family come to see me: obstetricians saw expectant mothers; pediatricians newborns. I did not attend to patients' needs during crises. They talked to therapists if they had personal problems. Hospitalists looked after the acutely

ill. Palliative-care physicians attended to those who were close to death.

Though my schedule became more predictable and I could sleep more soundly, I would gladly have traded my nine-to-five for my former sixty-hour-a-week schedule and the joy and satisfaction that went with it.

*Renate G. Justin
Fort Collins, Colorado*

AFTER A DECADE LIVING IN THE ROCKIES, my first wife and I took a six-month backpacking trip around the world. We wandered through exotic cities, along beaches, and over mountain ranges.

Back in the States, we settled in San Francisco. My most marketable skill was typing, and I got a secretarial job in a downtown high-rise. I missed the freedom of the road and felt like a prisoner in the nine-to-five world. During breaks I'd ride the elevator down to the street and gulp fresh air.

One morning I left an important paper at home and had to catch a midmorning bus back to retrieve it. Out the bus window, I saw a parallel universe to the nine-to-five world: hundreds of casually dressed people strolling, chatting, walking dogs, lounging in coffee shops, reading newspapers, scribbling in notebooks. A long line formed outside a movie theater that began showing films at 9 A.M.

A few months later I quit my job and started working nights as a cabdriver. I've spent my evenings behind the wheel and my mornings in a cafe for more than twenty years now.

*Brad Newsham
San Francisco, California*

MY JUNIOR YEAR AT COLLEGE I HAD a work-study job at the Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender, and Reproduction. The institute was doing little clinical research then and had become primarily a resource center. As one of the indexers, I had to read through vast amounts of printed materials, creating an index card for each item. I cataloged everything from scientific and medical journals to nudie magazines and pulp fiction. I could pick whatever I wanted, as long as I met a weekly quota.

During my second semester, my moth-

er's life began to unravel. My father had died the previous year, and, home alone every day, she'd begun to drink. As she was also epileptic, this created serious problems. I began driving home on weekends in an effort to keep her stable.

As an English-lit major, I had extensive reading assignments, which now weren't getting done on the weekends. I read late into the night instead and began sleeping on benches between classes. To make matters worse, I'd taken a second part-time job as my financial aid dwindled. My work as an indexer suffered, and I fell behind on my quotas.

At the end of the semester I was fired from my job at the Kinsey Institute. My eyes filled with shame and regret, but there was nothing to say. I'd been falling asleep in the carrels, in the middle of articles on suicide rates among gay teens or clitoral versus vaginal orgasms. Even graphic novels of taut nipples, leather whips, and throbbing cocks couldn't keep me awake.

Twenty-five years later, I saw the movie *Kinsey* and was reminded of my time at the institute. While I remember well the many warm, intelligent, and funny people who worked there, the only title I can recall from the hundreds I indexed is Tom of Finland's *Ride a Hot Marine*.

*Patricia Gray
Chicago, Illinois*

IN THE WAR YEARS OF THE 1940S, MY parents ran a small wholesale candy-and-tobacco business. They worked twelve hours a day, seven days a week, with no time off. Their place of business was so crowded with merchandise there was no place to sit down. My mother was always tying up bundles of cigarettes, candy, and cigars with coarse hemp twine. Her hands were raw from handling the rough string, and no matter how much aloe vera she used, they remained red.

My parents worked hard and fought constantly, but they took a break from both twice a day. At ten each morning, and again in midafternoon, my mother went into the kitchen in the back of the store to make tea. She poured boiling water over tea leaves in an old brass samovar her mother had brought over from

Russia in 1913. Then she carefully put a glass under the spigot and turned a small handle to fill it with tea. She added two teaspoons of sugar and a lemon wedge and brought the tea out front to my father, who noisily drank it. Sometimes she returned to the kitchen several times to refill his glass.

During this tea ceremony my parents stopped warring. I didn't have to escape to my bedroom on the second floor, close my door, and turn up the radio to drown out their bickering. I treasured these quiet moments when my family was at peace.

*Sam D.
San Anselmo, California*

I WORK FOR A FORTUNE 500 COMPANY. Before I came here, I spent fifteen years in a monastic community as a Catholic priest. The skills I learned in the monastery are readily transferable to my nine-to-five job administering employee-survey programs.

Three disturbing trends have surfaced in these surveys: nobody trusts anyone; employees don't believe in senior management; and workers are too stressed-out to care. When I was a monk, we referred to problems with trust, belief, and caring as crises of faith, hope, and charity. I've come to believe that corporate America's problem is not just managerial but also spiritual.

*Kenny Moore
Totowa, New Jersey*

AS ORGANIC FARMERS, MY HUSBAND and I work twelve-hour days, six days a week. I am often jealous of our employees, who go home at four to rest and relax. Meanwhile my husband and I negotiate to see who will prepare dinner and care for our children, while the other does the night-shift farm work.

When you love what you do, the line between work and play gets muddled. I also have yet to make peace with my role as a woman on the farm: I swing wildly between feeling satisfied about nurturing the earth and wondering why no one else can operate the washing machine or the dishwasher.

In the early years of running our farm, I wouldn't have thought to pay someone

else to do the work. I felt righteous in my toil. Now our idealistic dream has become a viable business that supports our family and a few employees, and I aspire to work nine to five.

*Genine Bradwin
Olympia, Washington*

MY TWENTIES WERE THE HARDEST years of my life. I had thrived in college, but then I moved back into my parents' house, in a subdivision of identical townhouses with no trees. My job, as an editorial assistant for a textbook publisher, paid well, but I was given little to do. My bright yellow cubicle had a bulletin board I was expected to decorate with cartoons or pictures of family and friends. I never put anything up.

Every Saturday I saw a psychiatrist who would sit and gaze at me until I spoke. He prescribed small blue pills, which I took at the water fountain around the corner from my cubicle, after making sure no one was looking.

My mother loved the publishing-company job and talked about it incessantly. If I tried to tell her how I felt about it, she wouldn't listen, but would just go on and on about how lucky I was to work for such a wonderful company, with a beautiful cafeteria where I could choose between hot and cold lunches. She drove me to work every day, filling the car with her words while I smoked in the passenger seat. I tried to tell her how uncomfortable I was in my job, in my skin, but she couldn't get past that cafeteria.

I worked with a group of overachieving, high-energy young career women. During breaks they would assemble in the cubicle across from mine to drink coffee and chat. I bought new dresses with matching shoes to try to fit in. Every day I made a mental note to join their conversation, but I never did. Instead I went out to lunch with a co-worker who drank. I'd down two Manhattans with her, enough to get me through the afternoon.

Finally, to get away from home, I moved to Boston with one of my sisters. We lived at the YWCA and ate dinner at Howard Johnson's. I'd order soup and two Manhattans. My sister only pretended to be job-hunting and spent her days at the Boston Common. We both disapproved

of each other.

When I had a job interview at another publishing company, I asked the interviewer only one question: Would I have to be in a cubicle?

Then I saw an ad for a proofreader at a printing plant, and I went for an interview. The place was dirty and noisy, with clanking machines and a tiny proofreaders' office with drafting tables and green lamps — and no cubicles. Perfect.

*Lynne Davis
Carbondale, Illinois*

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