



"She and Me"

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SHE AND ME

by

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The best news was the two dollars and fifty cents. Each Friday She would give me, a twelve year old, enough money to see sixteen movies or buy fifty Baby Ruth candy bars. And all I had to do for it was clean Her house for a few hours after school. A beautiful house, too, with plastic covered sofa and chairs, wall to wall blue and white carpeting, a white enamel stove, automatic washing machine—things common in Her neighborhood; rare in mine. In the middle of the War, She had butter, sugar, steaks and seam-up-the-back hose. Around the house Her grass was mowed and Her bushes were clipped to balls the size of balloons . Amazed and happy, I fairly skipped down sidewalks too new for hop scotch to my first job.

I wasn't very good at it. I knew how to scrub floors on my knees but not with a mop and I'd never encountered a Hoover or used an iron that was not heated by fire. So I understood Her impatience, Her nagging, Her sigh of despair. And I tried harder each day to be worth the heap of Friday coins She left on the counter by the back door. My pride in earning money that I could squander, if I chose to, was increased by the fact that half of it my mother took. That is, part of my wages were used for real things: an insurance policy payment maybe or the milkman. Pleasure, at that age, at being necessary to my parents was profound. I was not like the children in folk tales—a burdensome mouth to feed, a problem to be solved, a nuisance to be corrected. I had the status that routine chores at home did not provide—a slow smile, an approving nod from an adult. All suggestions that a place for me among them was immanent.

I got better at cleaning Her house, so good I was given more to do, much more. I remember being asked to move a piano from one side of the room to another and once to carry book cases upstairs. My arms and legs hurt and I wanted to complain but, other than my sister, there was no one to go to. If I refused Her I would be fired. If I told my mother she would make

me quit. Either way my finances and my family standing would be lost. It was being slowly eroded anyway because She began to offer me her clothes—for a price. And impressed by these worn things that looked simply gorgeous to a little girl with two dresses for school, I eagerly bought them. Until my mother asked me if I really wanted to work for cast offs. So I learned to say “No thank you” to a faded sweater offered for half a week’s pay. Still I had trouble summoning the courage to discuss or object to the increasing demands made on me.

One day, alone in the kitchen with my father, I let drop a few whines about the job. I know I gave him details, examples, but while he listened intently, I saw no sympathy in his eyes. No “Oh, you poor little thing.” Perhaps he understood I wanted a solution to work, not an escape from it. In any case, he put down his cup of coffee finally and said,

“Listen. You don’t live there. You live here. At home, with your people. Just go to work; get your money and come on home.”

That is what he said. This is what I heard.

1. Whatever the work, do it well; not for the boss but for yourself.
2. You make the job; it doesn’t make you.

3. Your real life is with us, your family.

4. You are not the work you do; you are the person you are.

I have worked for all sorts of people since then, geniuses and morons, quick-witted and dull, wide-hearted and narrow, and had many kinds of jobs, but from that moment on I never considered the level of labor to be the measure of self or placed the security of a job above the value of home.