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NOTES FROM THE LOWER CLASSES
by Rosalind Schwartz

My mother told me "There are two types of women . . . You have to get married - Do you want to be a Secretary all your life? Take a commercial course because you won't want to go to college - Its too hard for women . . . there are good women and bad women. Good women get married."

There were five of us who were friends in Junior High School. All were Jewish. We lived in the isolated splendor of Coney Island. One girl was going to be a Math Teacher, another a Lawyer, another a famous Historian, and another a Chemist. I was going to be a Secretary. All the mothers told me how smart I was to be a secretary - "Because you only get married anyway". Which, of course, was what all Jewish girls do. And they all did. Except me. I was the only one of the five who fulfilled herself.

It had never occurred to me to want to do anything else. There was a vague feeling of regret floating around my head - of waste - it seemed that I would never be alive - that my life would be spent serving men - first as a Secretary then as a Wife.

My mother made me understand that women don't go to college - only if they're very rich or very smart - "and you're neither".

I was the model of practicality when I took "The Co-op Course". It was a program for future secretaries - superficially. Actually it was a way of keeping poor women in school. Of doing us a favor. We worked one week and went to school one week. Everyone told me how lucky I was - I would be getting \$40.00 every two weeks. What would I do with the money? My mother told me she didn't need it. She just wanted me to get the practice so that I could get a good job when I graduated - Because "we can't afford to take care of you".

I didn't want to work. I felt stupid - that I was missing information that I had a right to have. One of my teachers advised against taking the course. I went to the director of the course to tell her I wanted out. She told me that it could not be done. I had signed my life away.

Everyone kept telling me that I was so lucky to have money. I went to a fortune teller in Coney Island who told me that I would always have money. I felt that it was probably true but I would never be alive.

Everything seemed to center around money. Money meant survival. It didn't matter how you lived - if you did anything. Your autonomy was your destruction. Survival meant dependency - being nice to your boss, getting a husband, "what would you do if your parents died. No one would take care of you. You would be out in the street. You would die."

I took the course and was presented with a typing job at Chase Manhattan Bank. It was so boring that I often became nauseous - my bones would hurt with boredom. The job began in the summer. The girls were working merely until they would go back to college in the Fall. They were all white and middle-class. None of them Jewish. My first day there - "You're Italian aren't you?" "No, she's Jewish - Right?" It seemed so important to them.

The image of a Jewish sniveling old man runs through every Jewish liberal mind. This is what she tries to escape - but what she knows she is. If she has money she can put up a good front. Work for causes, insult the Jews, talk about castrating mothers. If she doesn't have the money she identifies with him. She knows that's what people think of her, and that's what she's been forced to become.

I never spoke to anyone at work. There was nothing to speak about. We weren't the same - we all knew who the elite was - about what Jews were. I felt some relief when a Black girl came to the office. Someone at the bottom. Who worked for survival - who lived for survival. Who would also never be alive.

I never saw the \$40.00 every two weeks. I gave it to my mother, who doled out \$10.00 or \$15.00 for two weeks time and complained about how I was wasting my money. She saved it for me because I would spend it and feel sorry later when I needed it. Her fear that the world would destroy you if you were poor permeated every part of her. Money seemed a guarantee against every inhumanity. And, of course, it is. It's a pretty good buffer at any rate.

Graduation time came and I couldn't bear my stupidity. I'd go to college at night.

By this time the five friends had parted. Two were married. The Chemist and the Math Teacher became Housewives - the Chemist married a stupid man who she never spoke to. She had four boys who she would beat if they were bad and give tranquilizers to if they cried. Two went to college - married as soon as they graduated - and that was that.

I had gained 50 pounds at my job. It was obvious that I would never get a husband. My parents tried to find some justification for my having been born. Going to college provided the justification. I was worthwhile. I might become a teacher and rise above my class. The more they bragged about how smart I was going to become, about how being a teacher was a good way of surviving for an unmarried woman - the more I began resenting school. Nothing was my own - everything was done to please someone else.

When I was 21, I stole the bankbook from my mother and took out all my money - \$1800 - and squandered it. I would buy boyfriends dinner and take them out. I bought presents for everyone. I spent it on nothing that would last. I didn't want any reminder that I had ever had the money. I wanted to prove that I had escaped my Jewish fears. Then I quit college, resigned myself to the fact that I would always be a typist and still refuse to save money - or do anything substantial with it.

A Black militant who I worked with once told me that Jews were responsible for all the harassment of the Blacks. I agreed with her.

A friend once told me that all his bosses had been Jews - that they were cheap. I agreed with him.

I keep getting typing or filing jobs. It's been 14 years of work. I keep watching the groups who I work with - they change from Irish and Italian to Black and Puerto Rican. They all go on to better jobs - or become my supervisor.

Everyone tells me how rich the Jews are - all professionals and good in business - they're sagacious - they always outsmart everyone. It's something in our blood. There's nothing more powerful than a "Jewish Head".

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