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10

dirty secrets of a Bay Street temp

RULE #1 *Learn to say: no problem!*



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10

dirty secrets

of a Bay Street temp

Faced with ogling, screaming, cupidity and stupidity, she always had to bite her tongue. Now, reborn temp **Susan Bourette** dishes

| Photographs by Tom Feiler/Westside Studio

AT A GLANCE,

it looked like progress on Bay Street. In this redoubt of male pre-eminence, the two women sitting across from me had made it to the 49th floor, to the opulent offices of a blue-chip giant, the sort of company that people in business follow to find the real juice in the market. There they were in their matching pinstriped power suits, their elegant jewellery glistening ever so discreetly.

But these women weren't handing down the decisions that would make headlines, burn rivals and set billions of dollars in motion. Their job was to smile demurely while taking messages and directing telephone traffic.

"She will be with you momentarily," one of the women intones in my direction, smiling tightly and hoisting an eyebrow as she eyeballs me from head to toe. "Can you handle the phones for a moment?" she asks as she turns to her twin and rises from her chair. "It will take just a few minutes to get things ready." With that, she's marching across the



SHOES: RALPH LAUREN AT TOWN SHOES; DOG COLLAR AND LEASH: COURTESY MI-PET BOUTIQUE INC., TORONTO

antique floorboards, across the finely woven carpets, past the bookcases filled with the Socratic dialogues and medieval history, and into the boardroom.

I'm hoping to land a job working for the celebrated and wealthy mastermind who created the company—we'll call him Mr. Big. My aim is to glean some insight into what it's like to be a 21st-century administrative worker. Not just the temps like me, but also the lifers in the profession: the permanent secretaries, administrative/personal/executive assistants and receptionists. Have things changed in this most stereotyped job category?

As I wait to be called in for the interview, I shift uneasily in my seat, trying to conceal my discomfort in the uniform of Canadian commerce—suit jacket, pearls, feet pinched into non-sensible shoes. No sooner do I start to daydream about working for Mr. Big than I'm jolted by a ruckus coming from the boardroom.

Hey, isn't that the receptionist? Perched on high heels, hair swinging behind her, she ferries back and forth with stacks of plates balanced precariously in her arms. Just a few minutes ago, I might have mistaken her for one of the executives. Now she looks more like a waitress at Bymark—although, admittedly, I'd never seen a waitress maintain her hauteur while struggling to keep mustard from seeping into her Holt's private label.

Anyone could sympathize with her as she balanced the plates with her professionalism. But perhaps I could more than most. You see, I had long ago earned my stripes in this line of work.

It was the late '80s. Wide-eyed and freshly armed with an utterly useless philosophy degree, I hit the Bay Street temp circuit. For eight dreary months, I shuffled from tower to tower, into banks, brokerage houses and insurance companies. I spent my days stuffing envelopes, answering phones, typing form letters. And, above all, biting my tongue.

For discretion is the ultimate skill of female support staff. But no more. Herewith, the secrets of secretaries.



1 | You need to know only two words: "No problem"

A half-hour of nervous toe-tapping after the appointed hour, and it's finally showtime in my quest to get a job with Mr. Big. I'm ushered into a windowed aerie offering up a bird's-eye view of Bay Street, the playground of high rollers, magnates and titans-in-the-making.

Seated across a prairie-sized boardroom table is a towering woman in her early 30s. Her dark tresses are wound in a tight ponytail, her brows plucked with the precision of a microsurgeon. She smiles wanly and adjusts her horn-rimmed glasses as she studies my resumé.

"I want to tell you about this job, warts and all," she begins finally, with an unflinching stare. "Our attitude here is: Run, or be run over.

"I don't want you throwing attitude," she continues. "If Mr. Big says, 'I really feel like a doughnut from Tim Hortons,' I want to hear you say, 'No problem. I can do that for you,' rather than mumbling, 'I can't fucking believe he wants me to go to Tim Hortons for him again.'"

She pauses, brushing a piece of lint off her blouse. "My sister works for a non-profit," she resumes. "She's always talking about how her feelings get hurt. Then they all sit around and talk about it and everyone feels so much better." Big eye roll. "She'd never last a day here. These guys can yell and scream and be really demanding. You've got to be on your toes. And you'd better have a thick skin."

She suddenly glances at her watch and blurts out: "Are you okay with all aspects of the job?"

I want to say, "No way!" Instead, what comes out is: "No problem." I can't be sure whether she interviewed me or reprogrammed me. I am the Manchurian Assistant.

2

Secretaries are idiots

In *A Secretary's Secrets*, a 1958 training manual published by Maclean-Hunter, bosses were advised on how to address themselves to a secretary: "Be kind and be gentle when you talk turkey to her." One boss describes the ideal of the age: "I have a vegetable for a secretary. Heaven knows she does her work carefully and she's punctual and as neat as a pin."

In my quest to enter the modern-day secretarial sisterhood, I filled out dozens of multiple-choice tests. For instance:

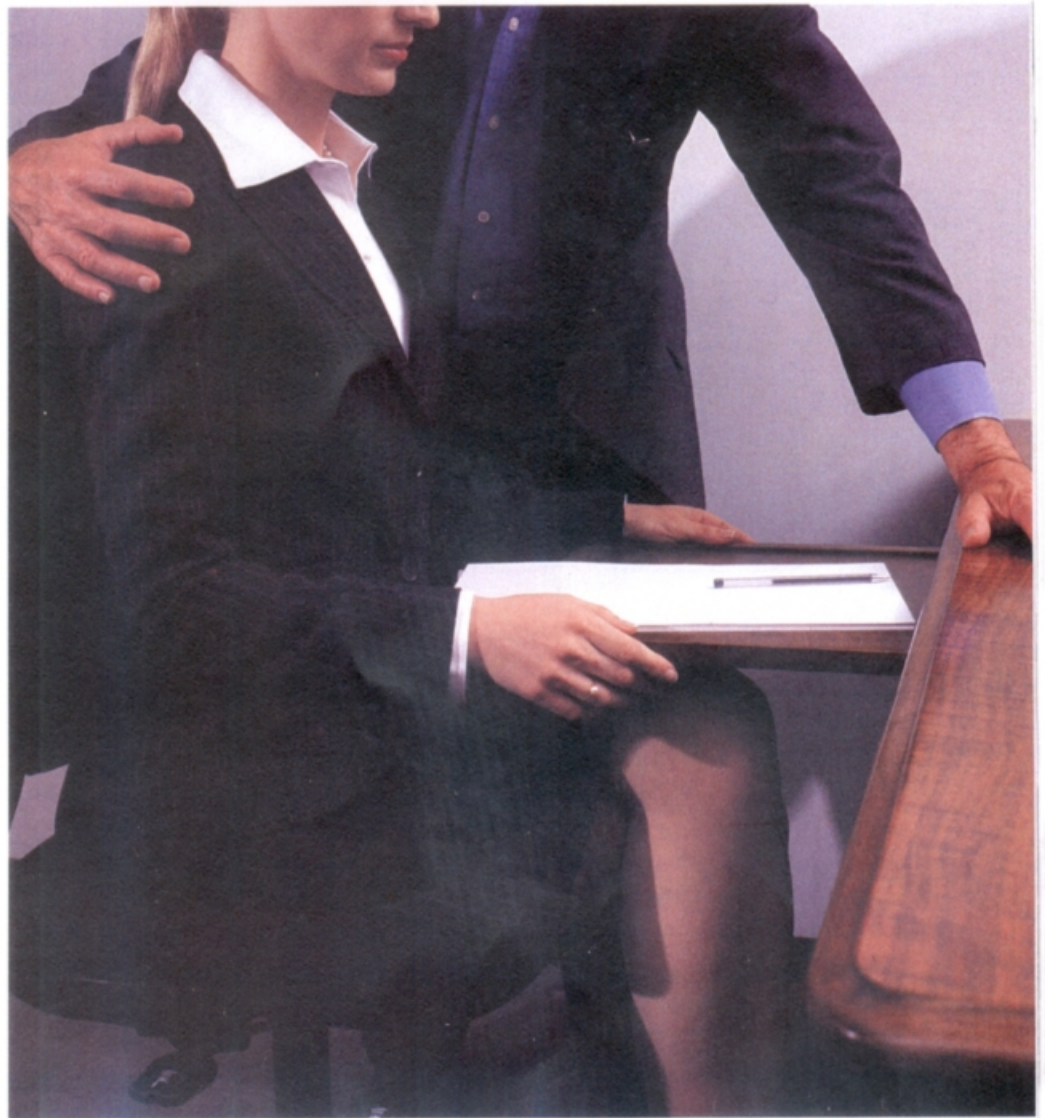
"It is appropriate to scream at someone who is screaming at you. True or False."

"It is appropriate to send a family member to do your job when you are ill. True or False."

"The customer is often wrong. True or False."

"It is appropriate to wear sweatpants and ripped T-shirts to work. True or False."

I may not have aced the software tests, but I figure I raised my prospects on these quizzes. The truth, in fact, is that I probably *would* scream back at someone who was screaming at me. But with three degrees now behind me—like so many temps who are university grads filling in time for one reason or another—at least I knew what the answer was supposed to be. Besides, these customer-service tests were welcome entertainment compared with the drudgery of what came next: The filing tests ("A goes before ____?").



3

Hundred-million-dollar losses are just part of business—it's your typo that will bring the company down

As part of the Mr. Big process, I am interviewed, and likewise am allowed to interview his current secretaries.

First up is a petite strawberry blonde with pretty green eyes and an uncertain smile. She picks the seat next to mine and shimmies even closer for a working-girl confidential. Everyone is impressed when they hear that she works for Mr. Big, she says. Indeed, sometimes he impresses her. He'll take calls from his grandchildren even if he's in a big meeting. He's very generous too. Every summer, he throws a pool party at his Rosedale mansion—it feels like something right out of a segment on *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*.

But he's also a stickler. A tiny chip in the office china? He notices. The antique carpet's crooked by half an inch? He's irked. A caller's name is misspelled, S-M-I-T-H instead of S-M-Y-T-H-E? Watch out! "I only ever made that mistake once," she sighs and shrugs. "You only ever make any mistake once."

Okay, not entirely true. There was a time, several months ago, when she did make the same mistake over and over again. Three days in, and both she and her co-worker were struggling to figure out the Byzantine new phone system. Calls were going unanswered. Clients were being disconnected. Mr. Big stepped in with this motivational speech: "Learn it by tomorrow, or you're both fired!"

"There are days when you just want to go home and curl up under a blanket," the receptionist confesses.

4

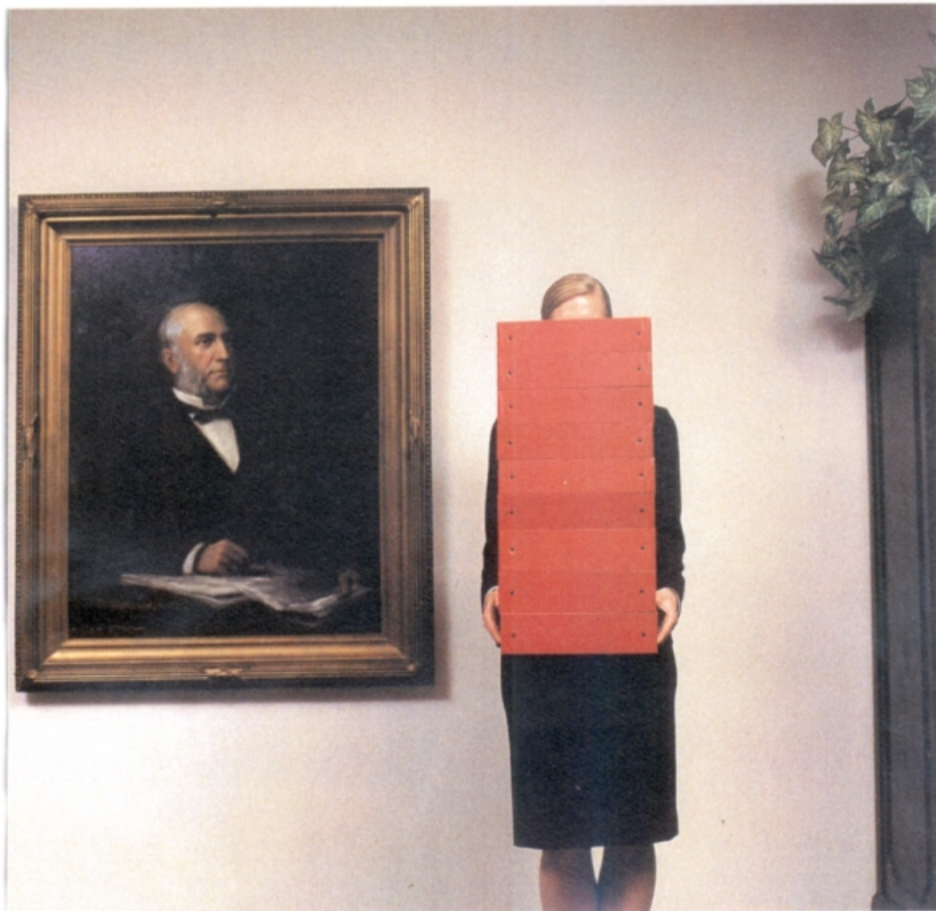
Fashion is the new apartheid

As soon as I landed my first assignment, the subject of dress was raised. "Corporate, corporate, corporate," chirped the woman from the temp agency over the phone. "You've got to be in a suit, and I'm not talking Suzy Shier."

The dress code is paramount in Mr. Big's swank office. No open-toed shoes. No bold colours. Suits and skirts are preferable. Pants are acceptable—but just barely. Mr. Big had outlawed them up until four years ago.

I can't help noticing that Mr. Big and his executives look astonishingly casual by comparison with the women who answer their telephones.

Taking my cue from the latter, I have gussied up for the part. Pinstriped jacket, silk blouse. A long way from the uniform of a freelance writer—ripped jeans and a sweatshirt. I've even ironed my hair, had a manicure and pedicure, and put on silk underwear.



5

It's like a marriage—without the upside

Next up in Mr. Big's office is receptionist number two—a bubbly, dark-haired, early-30s woman, the one I spotted doing double duty in food and beverages a little while earlier.

"Very nice to meet you," she trills, extending a delicate hand. "Hmmm. What can I tell you?"

Before I've had a chance to answer, she's already schooling me in the finer points of Reception 101.

Don't engage Mr. Big. Speak only when you're spoken to. Remember how he takes his coffee.

I can't help asking about the sideline in kitchen service. Isn't that a tall order for a receptionist?

"Sometimes I feel like a glorified waitress," she says, suddenly slumping over the boardroom table. "I'm used to it now, but when I first came here I felt like it was the 1950s all over again."

Since he's used to doing billion-dollar deals as casually as he makes lunch dates on the squash court, it's little surprise that a guy like Mr. Big can easily pin a price on anything, including the cost of the woman who answers his phones. What's she worth? Precisely \$36,000 a year—a little less than he earns in an hour's work.

Yet the work involves a lot more than dexterity at a keyboard. "It's just assumed that any executive assistant will have all of the IT skills," says Claudette Smith, program director for business studies at the

pharmacy to fetch a prescription, to the dry cleaner's to pick up a tuxedo for the evening's gala, or to Bloor Street to buy a trinket for the wife.

"Sometimes," Binsted says, "it might also mean being sent to buy treats for ladies other than the wife. Jewellery, perfume, lingerie. That kind of stuff. So it requires the utmost, utmost discretion."

On one crucial but (considering that last errand) contradictory point, she does agree with the '50s boss addressed in the Maclean-Hunter manual. "It is almost like a marriage."

6

Like the aquarium and the oil painting in the lobby, you are there to be stared at

Back in my temp days in the '80s, I fielded discreet requests from the top trader for drinks after work. And not-so-discreet requests from the diminutive, hair-plugged multimillionaire broker who hovered at my desk for hours every day. Such requests did make me very uncomfortable. After all, I had my eye on Francis, the dark-eyed, roguishly handsome maintenance worker.

Secretaries are not hit upon so frequently today. Thanks to the spectre of zillion-dollar lawsuits, everyone from the photocopy clerk to the company director is well schooled in the no-nos of sexual harassment, according to the experts.

But outside the envelope of employment law, appearances are still everything. When Mr. Big's CFO settles into a seat next to mine for an interview, he immediately checks out my ring finger—to determine, I figure, if I'm available and unencumbered for last-minute shift changes. Thankfully, I've just had my teeth cleaned, because he scours them with the same intensity as my hygienist.

G. Raymond Chang School of Continuing Education, an arm of Ryerson University. "These days, the job requires much more in terms of communications and time-management skills."

As it turns out, my fieldwork doesn't include actually working for Mr. Big. I don't know if I didn't make the grade or, after two rounds of interviews, they twigged to my secret agenda. But the more I learn about the double standards that persist in this profession, the more fortunate I feel to have not landed the job.

Deborah Tone is a former Miss Canada and one of Toronto's top executive assistants. She says the demands can be extraordinary for women in support roles. This is especially true for those who've reached the upper echelon—working for presidents and CEOs, earning between \$80,000 and \$150,000.

For some, the sacrifice may be years of sleep. For others, it's forgoing a house in the suburbs for a condo near the office with a cat. Many of these women take their careers just as seriously as their bosses do theirs.

But what separates *la crème de la crème* from the typical admin professional who earns an average of \$29,000 a year? A commitment to doing whatever it takes to keep the boss happy, Tone says. In other words, freeing him up to do what he's been hired to do—make shareholders fabulously rich.

"It takes a certain temperament to be able to do the job," Tone explains. One needs to anticipate the boss's needs, like making sure he has an additional copy of a client presentation in case he spills coffee on it. Or being the one who can calm jangled nerves during negotiations in a big deal.

On this point, Ann Binsted, a onetime temp and founder of the Toronto recruiting agency Executive Assistance Inc., agrees. Executive assistants may be dispatched on any number of errands. It can be to



7 | When not stared at, you are invisible

In my recent temp work, I was prepared to do whatever was thrown at me. Of course, my real purpose was journalistic. But it was hardly a cloak-and-dagger operation. I was using my own name. I did worry about the potential of being outed. When I temped for the research department of a brokerage, no one seemed to notice it was my mug shot and byline in the magazine lying at reception. Dozens of times a day, I walked past the door of an analyst I'd lunched with a few years back while working as a business reporter at *The Globe and Mail*. He never recognized me. Maybe it was because I was now better dressed.

It took two swipes of my just-issued security card to walk deep inside the brokerage's inner sanctum. I'd gained admission without so much as a background check. After all, what would a temp do with the firm's most confidential documents? It wasn't that I was above suspicion. I was beneath it.

8 | There are actually some nice bosses out there

Over lunch at an east-end Toronto pub, career secretary Lisa (not her real name) tells me she's learned everything she knows on the job. "It hasn't *all* been bad," the petite, doe-eyed woman says with a laugh. "I've worked for some wonderful people over the years."

Her favourite was the grandfatherly boss in bath and beauty products. "He was sweet. I got to know him really well, as well as his whole family. I didn't mind getting him his tea and cookies. I loved it because he was always so respectful."

Some in the field think the good guys are now predominating. "I hear more positive stories than ever before," says Ann Binsted of Executive Assistance. "These days the boss is more likely to see it as a partnership than ever before. They're more likely to delegate business tasks as opposed to just straight administrative duties."

"But do I still hear stories that shock me?" she continues, cooing somewhat conspiratorially. "Dirty little stories. Ohhh, yeah. Sometimes it's that the level of demand is completely off the charts. You know, the hot tub that needs to be cleaned after the boss's party. The phone calls in the middle of the night. That one's really common. Then there's the cowboys who cuss and swear and tell dirty jokes. That's still out there. But that's the exception."

9 | "Wrong" is a relative concept

My last temp gig in the '80s was in the graveyard typing pool of a prestigious law firm. It lasted two weeks before I was fired. My offence? I informed my manager that we were about to courier the wrong document to a client.

In another assignment, an adoption lawyer asked me to type up a case study of a would-be adoptive parent. Frustrated that I couldn't make sense of her notes, I simply made it up and handed it back to her. Excellent work, she told me. Please continue.

10 | Bay Street is one big daycare

Here's how one boss describes the 1950s ideal in *A Secretary's Secrets*: "To my mind, a private secretary is an 'office wife' for some eight hours of a man's day. She should give him subtle encouragement, approval, admiration, respect. She should laugh at his jokes, overlook his faults and moods, and assure him of her loyalty in unspoken ways."

Lisa, who told me over lunch she'd had some great bosses, still considers most of them something less than well-rounded.

"They're like little boys. They need their mommy at home and they need their mommy at work," she says. "I don't take crap from anyone any more."

She certainly didn't take it from the "old-man" boss who kept sticking his tongue in her ear. She didn't take it from the screamer. Or the megalomaniac. And she only took crap for so long from her most recent boss, a magnate with a worldwide reputation.

He'd lose it if his pickles weren't sliced properly. He'd lose it if the freshly squeezed grapefruit juice she served him had settled. He lost it for 45 minutes the day she replaced a broken coffee maker with one that wasn't in the company colours. And once, when he was left waiting at the airport for 10 minutes, he called the office, shouting: "How dare you keep me waiting here. Don't you know I'm the most important man in the world?"

She didn't complain when he hung up on her while she was trying to arrange a late-night delivery from the chi-chi restaurant Susur. (He'd shouted like a thwarted preschooler, "I don't want that! I want that pizza from Yonge and Sheppard!") She didn't even complain about having to serve cocktails to topless bimbos at one of his many all-night parties.

"I don't dwell on the idiots and assholes I've worked for," she says. "Just because you're a jerk doesn't make me any less a skilled professional."

There it is: an explanation for why things haven't changed, and why the archetypes of man-child CEO and mother-wife secretary won't dissolve anytime soon. A yell, a fondle, a request for a personal favour—none of these things is a material development to a business, and none of them undoes the reason women still put up with it all.

It's a job.

