

THE AUTOMAT

Well, here I go, I've done it, left home at last. I never thought that I'd be able to do it.

Father has been so demanding since Mother died, always expecting me to be there at his beck and call. Having to go to all those dinners with him and his partners. "We have to be seen you know, my dear. I'm expected to take care of all the accounts those people bring to my bank".

It was the same when my sister and I were young. Mother was always going out to dinners and the theatre with the directors and their wives. "It is the done thing for people in our position, darlings, we have to", she said.

We had a big brownstone house round the corner from Central Park and a nanny to keep us out of the way when Mother was entertaining the ladies to tea in the afternoons.

Nanny walked us all round the park – we knew every part of it. She was very stern and we had to act like little ladies all the time and be very prim and proper; but I managed to lead her a merry dance all the same. I used to hide one of her shoes if it was raining, so we wouldn't have to take our daily "constitutional" walk.

She would punish me by making me stand in the corner with one foot off the floor; God, that was agony, but it didn't stop me.

"One day my girl I'll break your spirit", she used to say, but somehow she never quite managed it.

Mother was a frail little thing who always had some illness or other but when she was well she was such fun and showered us with love. We were always happy around Mother. She used to tell us to hide when she knew Father was due home and jump out at him from all different places when he least expected it. He was so grumpy; that made us laugh all the more.

My sister Lily was four years older than me, so eventually left to go to a college for young ladies. It was while she was away that she met Brad, the up and coming manager of his father's empire of stores, selling the latest fashions of the day.

They fell in love quite quickly, even though Brad was ten years older. As soon as she left college they started to plan their "society wedding", at which I was chief bridesmaid. After the wedding they moved to Philadelphia to open a new store and to settle down there.

I felt quite lonely after Lily finally moved out and not long after that Mother became very ill and died within two months. It was a dreadful time as she was only 50 years old. My Father took it badly and depended heavily on me, expecting me to do what my Mother had done, accompanying him to all his functions. I hated those bumptious men and stuck-up women chatting about topics that did not interest me at all.

It made me quite depressed. I went on like this for a year and became more and more unlike myself.

Lily had come home for a visit, to tell Father and me that she was having her first child but was being very sick all the time. It was during this time that she noticed how unhappy I was and asked what was wrong.

Eventually I told her everything and she said that she would think about what could be done to help me. She went home after two weeks but during her time with me I was much happier, just being with her again and someone who was nearer my own age (which was 22). I wasn't getting any younger and was worried that I would become an old maid – and if it was left to my Father I would!

After she went home and spoke to Brad, it was decided that I should go and live with them after the baby was born, as Lily would need someone of her own there. It wasn't the same without family: yes, she had new friends but she wanted me there. Plus, there were lots of young men they were acquainted with which she was sure would do me the world of good!

Father took a lot of persuading but realised he couldn't keep me doing Mother's job forever. I had a life of my own to live and, apart from that, there was a new woman he had just been introduced to and whom he found delightful! His mind was now on other things.

So here I am, sitting in this godforsaken, miserable waiting room, about to go on the train to take me to start my new life, wondering how it will all work out.

The coffee is freezing cold now but I brighten as I hear the train pulling into the station.

"Right then, Lottie", I say to myself. Get up and get out of here – it's the start of a new beginning.

Let's hope everything works out well for me...

Elaine Leitch