

Bingo, Custard, and the Rag Trade

I had several temporary jobs as a student. One summer I worked in a bingo hall. It was a converted cinema on the edge of a large council estate in Hayes. It accommodated 2000 players seated at tables in front of a large stage with a curtain of gold strips where the screen used to be. At one side was the bar and opposite was the snacks and hot drinks counter where I helped serve teas, coffees, burgers and chips in the intervals. The stars were the bingo callers (mainly men) sharp suited, coiffed and perma-tanned, they joked and flirted with the customers (mainly women) and tried it on with the younger employees. I was intrigued to learn that there was such a thing as a 'good' bingo player. You might think that this was something to do with the number of bingo cards that they could handle at one time, but no, a 'good' bingo player was someone who frequently won. Luck and chance had nothing to do with it. The customers were fearsome women. Newcomers were snarled at if they sat at a table that 'belonged' to a regular and woe betide if they were lucky enough to win a substantial prize on their first outing.

My next job was in a staff canteen. The kitchen served both the ordinary canteen for the workers, and the restaurant for the managers. I operated the industrial sized dish washers – hot and steamy tunnels that blasted the crockery and cutlery clean in two minutes. As the most junior person in the kitchen I was also given the job of scrubbing out the meat safe. The chef was called George and looked like the Swedish chef on the Muppet Show. He didn't like anyone who was taller than him, which was most of the world. I had been working there a while when I was entrusted with the important job of straining the lumps out of the gravy. "Then, Lizbuff," George said, "You can strain the custard".

Then I worked for several weeks in Top Shop warehouse where clothes and accessories were labelled, sorted, packed and despatched to Top Shop outlets around the country. My job was to fix the price labels to the clothes using a staple gun that attached the card to the item with a plastic tag. It was tedious and hot work moving between lines of dresses wrapped in cellophane. I would be given 500 labels at a time to fix to 500 dresses. If you got to the end of the line and you had a label left over, or no label for the last dress, you had to go back down the line to find out where you had gone wrong. Still, I did make friends with a bunch of Australians who were working their way round Europe and they took me to ANZAC day at Alexandra Palace. Beer flowed and fists flew.....but that's another story!