The Peanut Butter Sandwich

Mavis King

Precisely at 7:45 a.m. Miss Benson came through the revolving doors of the Squibb building, her long, flat-heeled oxfords clunking solidly on the tiled corridor. She acknowledged the elevator boy's presence with a non-committal, "Good morning," as she passed the metal cage, and turned briskly through the door marked Employees Only in black letters across the top panel.

For fifteen years Miss Benson had tapped down the same corridor and turned through that doorway. She hung her coat on the hanger next to the wall. She always hung it there since she was the first to go to lunch. Then she gave herself a hesitant glance in the rusted mirror by the racks.

She hated the mirror. It faced the windows, and the glare from the streets through the slanted venetian blinds hit it squarely, showing up the beginning of a fleshy sag beneath her eyes, and the broken chains of wrinkles under her chin.

But every morning she paused to give herself a last minute inspection before she settled down behind her desk. Always it left her with a vague feeling of discomfort which lingered until her lunch hour, when she had another chance to see herself in the more flattering mirror over the drugstore counter.

Miss Benson knew she was not an attractive woman, nor even a particularly young woman. She had passed forty-five. She was often merely—well, she'd often overheard the younger girls in the office say it behind her back: she was drab. Her hair was snuff-colored tan.

When she was a young woman, she had wistfully hoped someday she might have softly waved, blue-white hair like her mother's. She had felt it would give her a simple beauty which her nondescript hair had failed to do. But she doubted now that her hair would ever be any other color than snuff-tan. She well knew, and even believed, what her working companions whispered about her, which only increased her opinion that the world was, after all, a fairly desolate place in which to live.

She swung open the door to the inner office and smiled vaguely about her. MacKnight, her superior, but at least ten years her junior, was flipping a dust cloth hastily across the desk. She smiled back pleasantly enough.

"Morning, Ruth," she said, and turned back to her dust rag.

It was still early. Four of the girls were standing by the adding machines, giggling over one of their private jokes.
Two of them half turned when Miss Benson walked to the back of the room. Phyllis, a heavy, blond girl who always wore a gold ankle bracelet, tight sweaters, and a lemon-colored rat in her hair, spoke first.

"Good morning, Miss Benson." She enunciated each word, giving the salutation an almost ludicrous sound. Miss Benson put her big brown purse down on the desk before answering. I don't like you, Phyllis, she thought to herself. Most of your lipstick is on your teeth and you carry a water line on both arms...But there was another reason, too, which she could not acknowledge even to herself. Such a penetrating dislike as she had for Phyllis, she felt, deserved a penetrating examination, but to do so would be to pull back the scabs off half-healed wounds; she was not up to it. However disillusioned she was about her own way of living, she had never allowed herself a moment's doubt that these girls, these callous, flippant, fast-talking office girls, were anything but insensitive creatures unworthy to share the value of her presence. The fact that they knew little about her, and apparently cared less, had long ceased to bother Miss Benson. In any event, she silently rationalized, it's not because they don't want to know; it's because I choose not to tell them.

Phyllis was looking at her, oddly. "Oh...good morning, Phyllis," she remembered suddenly, and smiled in trepidation. Janet was sucking the ear pieces on her blue harlequin glasses and asked from the side of her mouth, "How are you this morning, Ruth?"

Now why couldn't they show more respect for her fifteen years' seniority and call her by her last name? "Pretty well, thank you," she answered self-consciously, and sat down at her desk.

Two of the girls nudged each other and turned away quickly, their shoulders revealing suppressed mirth. Miss Benson looked down, feeling her pulse beat at her temple.

They're laughing at me, she thought, with her eyes staring fixedly at her rubber stamp. They're laughing because I always say "Pretty well, thank you." That's why Janet asked me how I was. She doesn't really care how I am.

She opened her drawer, took out the ink pad, and busied herself with changing the date on her rubber stamp. Then she looked up again—a foolish, determined smile on her lips. But no one was watching her now; the girls were shuffling to their desks, opening the files and arranging their stamps and receipts. She was already forgotten.

"Dick got in from Denver last night," Janet burst out to the room in general. Some of her friends looked up from their filing.

"I'd like to have seen that reunion!"
"Sure bet you had a bang-up time last night. When did you get in?"

Miss Benson pressed the stamp firmly against the ink pad, then patted together yesterday's receipts, squaring their edges with her left hand. Unconsciously her lips pinched together in a straight, disapproving line.

"Nearly three this morning," Janet said with a complacent giggle. Miss Benson's stamp thudded against the top receipt, leaving an oval of purple ink with yesterday's date and the word PAID in fine print across the paper. She worked cautiously, as was her habit, her thumb shoving the receipts back as they were stamped. In spite of her strong stamping, she could not fully shut out the sound of their voices, the laughter which she felt was pure affectation.

"Wasn't your mother a bit worried?" asked Fay, the small dark girl with the unusually white teeth and bright red lips. Miss Benson looked up stolidly, and nodded in approval. There was the only girl in the entire office she really cared about. Fay smiled a great deal and, more importantly, stopped occasionally beside Miss Benson's desk during the day to chat.

Janet snorted and plopped her shell-rimmed glasses back onto the bridge of her nose.

She has a long nose, thought Miss Benson with some small satisfaction.

"Mom worried? Don't forget, I voted last fall. I'm no kid."

"Guess her mother knows by now not to expect Janet in before the milkman," one of the girls put in. They apparently saw some humor in that and tittered from their desks.

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"Ruth, is that a new dress?" Hearing her own name, Miss Benson looked up, startled out of her reverie. It sometimes
happened that she became so absorbed she completely forgot where she was. Fay was standing by her desk smiling.

Miss Benson looked down, flushing happily. "My sakes, no," she demurred, laughing too quickly. This old fuchsia thing? It's made over from one of my mother's dresses, after she died."

"Well, it's a lovely color on you," Fay said. Miss Benson laughed again, with embarrassment. She wanted to sound natural, as though she were used to receiving compliments, but the laugh came out jerky and a little high. She coughed awkwardly, covering it.

"Thank you, Fay," she murmured, and quickly started stamping receipts again. Fay waited a moment, as if she were expecting some further conversation, then she went back to her desk.

What a kind remark, thought Miss Benson, feeling a glow of pleasure. I must remember to wear this dress more. Then she frowned slightly. Why didn't I think of something nice to say to her? Something about how nice her hair looks. She glanced up covertly. Too late again. The moment had passed.

The room took on the sounds that came with a busy morning. Gladys was thumping noisily on the adding machine, her lips unconsciously moving as she tapped the keys. The two new girls were filing at the green metal tables against the wall, only occasionally glancing up from their work.

Miss Benson smiled wryly to herself. It won't be long and they'll be spending most of their time looking around, sneaking out to the water cooler to gossip, just like the rest, she thought. Phyllis and Janet had their backs to Miss Benson, and were talking together over their filing boards.

MacKnight was seated at her desk in the front office, her wide hips swelling out over the back of the chair. The telephone receiver was hooked around her neck and her voice exploded into it.

Miss Benson smiled to herself. She found more to be amused at than any one would have supposed, but she never allowed her smiles to get beyond her teeth. Look at MacKnight, she laughed inwardly. Nearly choking herself with the telephone between her chin and collar bone. She thinks it makes her look efficient when she holds the receiver like that. Why doesn't she use her empty right hand?

Miss Benson went on stamping receipts, listening to MacKnight's irritated voice. "I don't care what Mr. Post says," she exclaimed testily, blowing a loose strand of hair back from her forehead. "I tell you we don't make such errors down here. Well, not often. Of course, I'll check. But if he's wrong, and I think he is, I'll be up to tell him so!" She bounced the receiver back on its hook, and sat there a few seconds, her fingernails clicking on the table. Instantly everyone in the office was
watching MacKnight with wary eyes. Miss Benson went on stamping.

An instant later it came, as she knew it would. She was forced to drop her own pose of indifference, and looked up. "Girls!" The work stopped immediately, the adding machine's racket died to a silence. Miss Benson put down her stamp. She detested being included under such a title. Why couldn't MacKnight say, "Girls, and Miss Benson." After all, didn't she have fifteen years seniority? Must she be classified with these impudent tenderfeet?

"Someone's been sending receipts to the auditor's office with last month's date stamped on them again." MacKnight paused effectively. The girls looked down at their own stamps to verify the date. Mistakes such as that frequently occurred in the cashier's office, but MacKnight never admitted it to anyone outside the department.

"I'd like to think the auditors made the error. They're always making mistakes up there," she continued, "but Mr. Patterson says they've cross-checked their files."

"Whose stamp was it, Mac?" asked Phyllis, pulling her sweater down tighter across her bosom.

MacKnight answered curtly, "Number twenty-one."

Phyllis turned pink, and everyone looked at her, knowing.

Miss Benson smiled inwardly behind her teeth. I guess now you'll do less talking and more working, she thought with grim satisfaction.

Suddenly Phyllis turned her chair around and gestured toward Miss Benson. "You used stamp twenty-one yesterday, Ruth," she said, but her voice was sharp and defensively high. The girls turned in a body to stare at Miss Benson. She sat there, feeling a constriction about her heart; her chest rose and fell with her quickened breath. They might call her stuffy and colorless, but never could they say she lacked efficiency! She made no errors, they must know that! Oh, God, to be crucified this way!

She managed finally to say, in a voice hoarsened with hate and fear, "No, Phyllis, you're thinking of Tuesday. I've been using number seven for the last two days."

MacKnight nodded, verifying Miss Benson's answer. "That's right," she admitted, "it was your stamp, Phyllis... Now girls," she raised her voice. "I'm speaking to all of you—not only Phyllis. You've got to be more careful. Patterson's going to want to know who did it, and I have no alternative but to make a report."

Phyllis chewed her lip sullenly, casting a churlish glance back at Miss Benson. "I was pretty sure you used it yesterday, Ruth," she declared pettishly.

Miss Benson sat there, her belt feeling very tight around...
her waist. She exhaled slowly then, realizing she had been holding her breath. How she hated their watchful eyes. How well she knew what they were thinking. They wish it had been me, she thought bitterly. They'd like to see me hurt... but why? What have I done to them? She felt baffled and confused, not understanding them.

She had been there when they came and she would be there when they left. She sensed she was a fixture to them, drab and uninteresting as the gray metal tray on her desk. She never talked about herself, her family, the kind of books she read, what it had been like to be young. She had never been an impulsive conversationalist, even as a girl. Perhaps they even knew she had never known the joy of holding a pink chiffon formal up against her body, and smiling into a mirror, confident with youth and fresh beauty. Her girlhood, too, had been filled with longing and despair. But what did they know about her way of life apart from the office? They had never seen her little room on Ashland Avenue. They had never seen her narrow brown metal bed, her African violets sunk in little white pots, her gold fish in the glass tank by the window. What did they know about her? Would she tell them? She felt a choking in her throat. Never! Make herself an open joke, a thing of mockery to them? Oh God, never!

She wanted to slap her hand across Phyllis' face, to scream, "You dare to accuse me? You... you..." But she had been suppressing her emotions for too many years; so she attempted a smile.

"Don't you remember, Phyllis," she ventured, hardly trusting her voice, "when you stood by Fay's desk and said, 'Twenty one, my lucky number'?" Phyllis, remembering, turned ill-humoredly back to her filing. Miss Benson, glancing sideways at her profile, saw the girl's lips were pinched together raising the line of her chin to an ugly point.

The others, feeling a little disappointed over the placid way Miss Benson had turned aside the accusation, went silently back to their work.

The hands on the round clock jumped. Eleven o'clock. Miss Benson's chair squeaked backwards. Her lunch hour. She wished she didn't have to go that minute. She knew the room would be buzzing when she left. She picked up her big brown purse and closed the drawer. As she walked down the narrow aisle between the desks, she could see Janet looking up from the filing board to watch her, and the other heads turned covertly. When she reached the door, she bent to pick up her magazine which she always left tucked inside the front table drawer, and, as she turned back, she caught a glimpse of Phyllis from the tail of her eye, walking down the aisle,
swinging her hips from side to side in an exaggerated movement. She knew instantly her own walk was being imitated. Cruel, brutal...she wept inwardly. Pretending she did not notice, she swung open the paneled door.

"Have a nice lunch," MacKnight said perfunctorily from her front desk.

"Thank you, I will." The door automatically started swinging shut behind her, and in the long seconds it took before it clicked, Miss Benson heard the muted laughter inside the room.

"She sure needs a new foundation, doesn't she?" asked Phyllis. And over the gasps of suppressed laughter, Janet said, "You know, I wonder what Ruth does on her lunch hours and when she's home. Do you s'pose she just gets undressed and goes right to bed?"

"I can tell you what she does on her lunch hour," Phyllis volunteered. "She walks down to the corner drugstore, invariably asks for a peanut butter sandwich and a glass of milk. She eats the sandwich, drinks the milk, looks carefully at all the pictures in her magazine, pays the cashier, walks back to the Squibb building, takes the elevator up to seven, and spends the rest of her hour sitting by the window, reading."

Several voices combined. Miss Benson heard only one, clearly. "Haven't you ever seen her there when we go up to the lounge to play bridge? Miss Benson and her inevitable magazine...boy, what a dehydrated life."

Miss Benson removed the coat from the hanger by the wall, slipped her arms into the sleeves. Her purse fell to the floor and she bent over to pick it up. Her hand was trembling when she slid it under her arm again. She caught sight of her face in the rusted mirror, and grimaced at the reflection. There was a look of uncertainty about her mouth.

"I'll go to the rest room and fix up," she whispered, half aloud. John, the elevator boy, looked up with bored eyes as she passed his cage on the way to the women's room. The long lavatory with its high, white walls was deserted. She put her purse and magazine down on the table inside the door and took out her comb. She made a few ineffective passes at her hair, and noticed automatically that her lipstick was all chewed off.

"It's hateful, hateful," she whispered to the empty room. "They just don't understand me. They're so smug and quick to poke fun at those they don't understand." She put her comb back into her purse and drew out the square white compact with the blue larkspur painted diagonally across the white enamel. She touched the flowers with her index finger, and suddenly she smiled, for she was alone. From Danny and Jane, her brother's children. She opened the com-
pact and patted white powder across her nose and forehead, briskly, because there was a pain pushing against her heart, and she wanted to thrust it away.

But I'm happy, she told herself. Don't I have a grand little niece and nephew? And a fine, splendid brother and lovely sister-in-law? What more can I want? I have my room, all my own, with my new lounge chair all paid for. And my African violets and my fish.

Gently she patted on her lipstick, then blotted almost all of it off again. She was ready for lunch. But something held her there for another second, and in the brief moment that she looked again at the white face in the mirror with the snuff-tan hair looped behind her ears, she felt an agonizing sensation of loathing for that face, that body, and the personality housed inside it. She turned away quickly, sorry she had looked so long.

Outside, the bright sunshine hit the cement walk and made her squint. It was getting warmer, almost spring. Her fur collar scratched against her neck, and she pushed it down waspishly. In the park across the street she noticed the old men were sitting on benches, watching the pedestrians and automobiles. If I were an old man I'd probably be doing the same thing, she thought dismally. A gray pigeon fluttered by her face and waddled across the sidewalk in front of her feet. Miss Benson waited at the corner for the red light to change. Her magazine was rolled up tightly beneath her arm. Her fur collar popped up again, rubbing her neck.

She watched the fat pigeon shuffling in the dirt. So they think I need a new foundation. She wondered if her lips were moving as she thought. Well, I can't help it. Anyway, I don't care what they think, she lied silently.

The light changed to green. She stepped off the curb with a group of people and headed for the drugstore, wondering if anyone was noticing the way her hips bounced. And I don't go home and just go to bed, either, she complained silently. Tonight I'll wash my underclothes and the green blouse I wore last week. Then I'll do some mending. It'll be eight then, and I'll have time to finish crocheting the dresser scarf for Harriet's birthday. Then I'll take a bath, and. . . . and then, I'll. . . go to bed.

Always before such a program had seemed satisfactory. Now there was the funny ache inside her again, giving everything an acid taste. The drug store counter was lined with people, and she finally found a standing place behind a large bald man. She stood there, staring blindly at the metal orange squeezer behind the counter, feeling desolate.

So they think I'm heavy-footed and unimaginative, she reflected, her eyes moving blankly to the white cuff on the
waitress’ arm, then slowly to a chocolate-covered doughnut inside the glass window on the inside counter. They’re right, of course. She put her hand up quickly to her mouth, wondering if perhaps she had spoken aloud. The pain was suffocating now, and she knew that her words could never again be taken back. What an admission to make, even to herself!

The heavy man wiped a paper napkin across his mouth, wadded it into a ball and pushed it inside his empty water glass. Then he squeezed laboriously off the high stool. She sat down quickly in his place, feeling with shriveling distaste the warmth of the leather seat he had vacated.

A waitress started clearing away the dirty dishes. Miss Benson sat there, watching her own hands, the familiar knuckles, the pale pink of her nails.

So I’m dull. She digested that carefully. Yes, it’s true. And I have a blunted personality too. I say the same things to the same people, and think the same thoughts every day, every day. Perhaps... perhaps I should... A small hope sparked inside her breast.

Perhaps I can still change...

“What’s yours?” asked the waitress flatly. Miss Benson fingered the menu, scratching her thumb nail along the paper clip at the top. But how could she begin? Where should she start? There was so much that needed changing. So much, and... she was forty-seven. Still...

“You order, Miss?” asked the waitress again, impatiently.

That’s right, thought Miss Benson, suddenly tired. My name is Miss. And I need a new foundation garment. And... besides... why should I care what they think? I’m not what they say, I’m not, I’m not. They’ll see. She sighed, and studied with her usual care.

“I’ll... I think I’ll just have a peanut butter sandwich today, and...” she paused, pretending to study the menu carefully. “And a glass of milk,” she said lamely. Then she unrolled her magazine from beneath her arm to look at the pictures.

Blake and The Child

Sally Forsythe

In “The Lamb,” from Songs of Innocence, William Blake captured the sensitive imaginativeness, the knowledge, and the awareness of childhood in a filigree of delicate language, verse form, and understanding. He lifted the veil of childhood and revealed that period of life in which imagination, not yet restricted, gives the child a pure understanding of God and his relations to Him and to the world about him. Blake knew that the child sees the world through his imagi-