

## SUMMER JOB

Cindy Schamel

Her mother noticed that Caroline was getting more and more reticent and withdrawn. This was a drastic change from the bubbly, outgoing daughter she was used to having around the house.

The change seemed to coincide with Caroline's taking a part-time job to earn her own spending money. Mrs. Parker was worried about her daughter. She didn't want to interfere, yet she didn't want her daughter's health or disposition to suffer from anything as trivial as this part-time job. It was Caroline's first summer job, except for some occasional babysitting the summer before. But now that she was sixteen, she had to make her own spending money.

Her job was in a large discount store, and she worked in the housewares department. She stocked shelves and picked up things that were in the aisles, ran price checks, and in general did a little bit of everything.

Caroline liked working and being dependent on herself for her allowance. It made her feel very grownup. But growing up meant that she had to do things she didn't particularly want to do because they had to be done. She didn't like going back into shipping and up into the warehouse for stock. It was such a big place filled to the ceiling with aisle after aisle of boxes. Down the center aisle the sprinkler spigots protruded from the ceiling like so many vertebrae in a huge skeleton. The Muzak from the speakers was the only touch of humanity in the world of crates.

Quite frankly, the place spooked her. It seemed to be the core of the store. The brain. The store seemed like an animal that let the managers and human bosses think they ran the place. In reality, the store ran itself. Have you ever gone to a store after an item and they said it's been ordered or it hasn't come in or it's out of stock, thought Caroline. Maybe it's no accident.

Shipping and the warehouse were the real managers of the huge operation. Then there was the incinerator down in shipping. It even had a little room to itself, its own private office. There was a sign in the room that read "All Employees Must Burn Their Own Trash."

The incinerator had a foul disposition. To feed it you pushed a lever that opened the thick metal lips of this raging monster. It fed on boxes and plastic, generally anything that would burn. Then you closed its mouth and hurried out to get back to your other duties.

The employees were pleasant to work with; Becky Robertson, who worked with Caroline, and Mr. Schweitzer, the boss, were friendly and helpful. Yet every day Caroline seemed a little more edgy and disturbed about something. Her mother was the first to notice, and she asked Caroline's father what he thought one night after dinner.

"Liz, don't worry about it. Kids her age get moody. Don't you remember when you were sixteen? It's just a phase."

"But, Bob," she protested, "she's hardly eating a thing and she seems so preoccupied with something."

"Honey, it's probably just that Joe Evans boy." Bob chuckled. "She's probably moody about her 'love life'."

"I guess you're right, dear. By the way, did you remember to buy the curtain hooks for the bedroom?"

And so it went for another week. Caroline was becoming increasingly nervous. It was all she could do to force herself to go to work. But what could she give as a reason for quitting her first job? That she was afraid of a bunch of boxed merchandise in the rear of the store? No. She had too much pride for that. She would stick it out for the rest of the summer.

It was the last day before a long weekend. Caroline's birthday was on Monday and it was store policy that employees didn't work on their birthdays. It was a long Friday night. By eight o'clock Caroline was exhausted. There seemed to be an air of something in the store. What was it? Expectancy? Anxiety? It wasn't in the employees, but in the very fibers of the store itself. When she went to the warehouse for some stock, Caroline knew. It was a quiet, knowledgable waiting. She knew the store's secret—and now it knew that she knew. It began to fight her. When she came down from the warehouse, she tripped on a small box and almost fell. She was certain the box hadn't been there five minutes before.

Later she asked Becky to go with her when she burned the trash. So Becky went, too. They were both in the little incinerator room when Becky was called over the intercom to the front of the store.

Don't leave me alone, screamed a voice inside Caroline. But she turned and Becky was gone. The intercom! Of course! Why hadn't she thought of it before? It always seemed to interrupt you when you were busy doing something. And it was on purpose. The wirings of the system were the very veins and capillaries that carried the electric blood of the store.

Suddenly the door to the incinerator room swung shut. Caroline grabbed the handle, but it was locked. She shouted for help, but the door was thick. Was it the customers' imaginations that the Muzak seemed to get louder?

Caroline frantically pushed the button to the left of the incinerator's gaping jaws—the one that sprayed water on the fire when it got too hot. But she knew when she pushed it that all hope was gone. The store knew.

The fire got hotter. Its tongue leapt out at Caroline. She tried to twist the lever that closed the iron jaws, but it was hot and burned. She saw the sneer on the face of the incinerator, the fiery tongue rising out of the long, bricklined throat. Caroline screamed.

"Say, what's keeping Caroline?" Mr. Schweitzer asked Becky. "She's got a lot more work to do tonight."

"I don't think she's feeling too well."

"Well as soon as you see her, tell her to report to me."

Some of the shoppers noticed something—their imaginations were playing tricks on them again. For, of all things, they heard over the Muzak what sounded like a huge burp.