

Mary Gaitskill, *Secretary* (1988)

The typing and secretarial class was held in a little basement room in the Business Building of the local community college. The teacher was an old lady with hair that floated in vague clouds around her temples and Kleenex stuck up the sleeve of her dress for some future, probably nasal purpose. She held a stopwatch in one old hand and tilted her hip as she watched us all with severe, imperial eyes, not caring that her stomach hung out. The girl in front of me had short, clenched blond curls sitting on her thin shoulders. Lone strands would stick straight out from her head in cold, dry weather.

It was a two-hour class with a ten-minute break. Everybody would go out into the hall during the break to get coffee or candy from the machines. The girls would stand in groups and talk, and the two male typists would walk slowly up and down the corridor with round shoulders, holding their Styrofoam cups and looking into the bright slits of light in the business class doors as they passed by.

I would go to the big picture window that looked out onto the parking lot and stare at the streetlights shining on the hoods of the cars.

After class, I'd come home and put my books on the dining room table among the leftover dinner things: balled-up napkins, glasses of water, a dish of green beans sitting on a pot holder. My father's plate would always be there, with gnawed bones and hot pepper on it. He would be in the living room in his pajama top with a dish of ice cream in his lap and his hair on end. "How many words a minute did you type tonight?" he'd ask.

It wasn't an unreasonable question, but the predictable and agitated delivery of it was annoying. It reflected his way of hoarding silly details and his obsessive fear that I would meet my sister's fate. She'd had a job at a home for retarded people for the past eight years. She wore jeans and a long army coat to work every day. When she came home, she went up to her room and lay in bed. Every now and then she would come down and joke around or watch TV, but not much.

Mother would drive me around to look for jobs. First we would go through ads in the paper, drawing black circles, marking X's. The defaced newspaper sat on the dining room table in a gray fold and we argued.

"I'm not friendly and I'm not personable. I'm not going to answer an ad for somebody like that. It would be stupid."

"You can be friendly. And you are personable when you aren't busy putting yourself down."

"I'm not putting myself down. You just want to think that I am so you can have something to talk about."

"You're backing yourself into a corner, Debby."

"Oh, shit." I picked up a candy wrapper and began pinching it together in an ugly way. My hands were red and rough. It didn't matter how much lotion I used.

"Come on, we're getting started on the wrong foot."

"Shut up."

My mother crossed her legs.

"Well," she said. She picked up the "Living" section of the paper and cracked it into position. She tilted her head back and dropped her eyelids. Her upper lip became hostile as she read. She picked up her green teacup and drank.

"I'm dependable. I could answer an ad for somebody dependable."

"You are that."

We wound up in the car. My toes swelled in my high heels. My mother and I both used the flowered box of Kleenex in the dashboard and stuck the used tissue in a brown bag that sat near the bump in the middle of the car. There was a lot of traffic in both lanes. We drove past the Amy Joy doughnut shop. They still hadn't put the letter Y back on the Amy sign.

Our first stop was Wonderland. There was a job in the clerical department of Sears. The man there had a long disapproving nose, and he held his hands stiffly curled in the middle of his desk. He mainly looked at his hands. He said he would call me, but I knew he wouldn't.

On the way back to the parking lot, we passed a pet store. There were only hamsters, fish and exhausted yellow birds. We stopped and looked at slivers of fish swarming in their tank of thick green water. I had come to this pet store when I was ten years old. The mall had just opened up and we had all come out to walk through it. My sister, Donna, had wanted to go into the pet store. It was very warm and damp in the store, and smelled like fur and hamster. When we walked out, it seemed cold. I said I was cold and Donna took off her white leatherette jacket and put it on my shoulders, letting one hand sit on my left shoulder for a minute. She had never touched me like that before and she hasn't since.

The next place was a tax information office in a slab of a building with green trim. They gave me an intelligence test that was mostly spelling and "What's wrong with this sentence?" The woman came out of her office holding my test and smiling.

"You scored higher than anyone else I've interviewed," she said. "You're really overqualified for this job. There's no challenge. You'd be bored to death."

"I want to be bored," I said.

She laughed. "Oh, I don't think that's true."

We had a nice talk about what people want out of their jobs and then I left.

"Well, I hope you weren't surprised that you had the highest score," said my mother.

We went to the French bakery on Eight-Mile Road and got cookies called elephant ears. We ate them out of a bag as we drove. I felt so comfortable, I could have driven around in the car all day. Then we went to a lawyer's office on Telegraph Road. It was a receding building made of orange brick. There were no other houses or stores around it, just a parking lot and some taut fir trees that looked like they'd been brushed. My mother waited for me in the car. She smiled, took out a crossword puzzle and focused her eyes on it, the smile still gripping her face.

The lawyer was a short man with dark, shiny eyes and dense immobile shoulders. He took my hand with an indifferent aggressive snatch. It felt like he could have put his hand through my rib cage, grabbed my heart, squeezed it a little to see how it felt, then let go.

"Come into my office," he said.

We sat down and he fixed his eyes on me. "It's not much of a job," he said. "I have a paralegal who does research and legwork, and the proofreading gets done at an agency. All I need is a presentable typist who can get to work on time and answer the phone."

"I can do that," I said.

"It's very dull work," he said.

"I like dull work."

He stared at me, his eyes becoming hooded in thought.

"There's something about you," he said. "You're closed up, you're tight. You're like a wall."

"I know."

My answer surprised him and his eyes lost their hoods. He tilted his head back and looked at me, his shiny eyes bared again. "Do you ever loosen up?"

The corners of my mouth jerked, smilelike. "I don't know." My palms sweated.

His secretary, who was leaving, called me the next day and said that he wanted to hire me. Her voice was serene, flat and utterly devoid of inflection.

"That typing course really paid off," said my father. "You made a good investment." He wandered in and out of the dining room in pleased agitation, holding his glass of beer. "A law office could be a fascinating place." He arched his chin and scratched his throat.

Donna even came downstairs and made popcorn and put it in a big yellow bowl on the table for everybody to eat. She ate lazily, her large hand dawdling in the bowl. "It could be okay. Interesting people could come in. Even though that lawyer's probably an asshole."

My mother sat quietly, pleased with her role in the job-finding project, pinching clusters of popcorn in her fingers and popping them into her mouth.

That night I put my new work clothes on a chair and looked at them. A brown skirt, a beige blouse. I was attracted to the bland ugliness, but I didn't know how long that would last. I looked at their gray shapes in the night-light and then rolled over toward the dark corner of my bed.

My family's enthusiasm made me feel sarcastic about the job, about any effort to do anything, in fact. In light of their enthusiasm, the only intelligent course of action seemed to be immobility and rudeness. But in the morning as I ate my poached eggs and toast, I couldn't help but feel curious and excited. The feeling grew as I rode in the car with my mother to the receding orange building. I felt like I was accomplishing something. I wanted to do well. When we drove past the Amy Joy doughnut shop, I saw, through the wall of glass, expectant construction workers in heavy boots and jackets sitting on vinyl swivel seats, waiting for coffee and bags of doughnuts. I had sentimental thoughts about workers and the decency of unthinking toil. I was pleased to be like them, insofar as I was. I returned my mother's smile when I got out of the car and said "thanks" when she said "good luck."

"Well here you are," said the lawyer.

He clapped his short, hard-packed little hands together and made a loud noise.

"On time. Good morning!"

He began training me then and continued to do so all week. No interesting people came into the office. Very few people came into the office at all. The first week there were three. One was a nervous middle-aged woman who had an uneven haircut and was wearing lavender rubber children's boots. She sat on the edge of the waiting room chair with her rubber boots together, rearranging the things in her purse. Another was a fat woman in a bright, baglike dress who had yellow in the whites of her wild little eyes, and who carried her purse like a weapon. The last was a man who sat desperately turning his head as if he wanted to disconnect it from his body. I could hear him raising his voice inside the lawyer's office. When he left, the lawyer came out and said, "He is completely crazy," and told me to type him a bill for five hundred dollars.

Everyone who sat in the waiting room looked random and unwelcome. They all fidgeted. The elegant old armchairs and puffy upholstered couch were themselves disoriented in the stiff modernity of the waiting room. My heavy oak desk was an idiot standing against a wall covered with beige plaster. The brooding plants before me gave the appearance of weighing a lot for plants, even though one of them was a slight, frondy thing.

I was surprised that a person like the lawyer, who seemed to be mentally organized and evenly distributed, would have such an office. But I was comfortable in it. Its jumbled nature was like a nest of available rags gathered tightly together for warmth. My first two weeks were serene. I enjoyed the dullness of days, the repetition of motions, the terse, polite interactions

between the lawyer and me. I enjoyed feeling him impose his brainlessly confident sense of existence on me. He would say, "Type this letter," and my sensibility would contract until the abstractions of achievement and production found expression in the typing of the letter. I was useful.

My mother picked me up every day. We would usually stop at the A&P before we went home to get a loaf of white French bread, beer and kielbasa sausage for my father. When we got home I would go upstairs to my room, take off my shirt and blouse, and throw them on the floor. I would get into my bed of jumbled blankets in my underwear and pantyhose and listen to my father yelling at my mother until I fell asleep. I woke up when Donna pounded on my door and yelled, "Dinner!"

I would go down with her then and sit at the table. We would all watch the news on TV as we ate. My mother would have a shrunken, abstracted look on her face. My father would hunch over his plate like an animal at its dish. After dinner, I would go upstairs and listen to records and write in my diary or play Parcheesi with Donna until it was time to get ready for bed. I'd go to sleep at night looking at the skirt and blouse I would wear the next day. I'd wake up looking at my ceramic weather poodle, which was supposed to turn pink, blue or green, depending on the weather, but had only turned gray and stayed gray. I would hear my father in the bathroom, the tumble of radio patter, the water, the clink of a glass being set down, the creak and click as he closed the medicine cabinet. Donna would be standing outside my door, waiting for him to finish, muttering "shit" or something.

Looking back on it, I don't know why that time was such a contented one, but it was.

The first day of the third week, the lawyer came out of his office, stiffer than usual, his eyes lit up in a peculiar, stalking way. He was carrying one of my letters. He put it on my desk, right in front of me.

"Look at it," he said. I did.

"Do you see that?"

"What?" I asked.

"This letter has three typing errors in it, one of which is, I think, a spelling error."

"I'm sorry."

"This isn't the first time, either. There have been others that I let go because it was in your first few weeks. But this can't go on. Do you know what this makes me look like to the people who receive these letters?"

I looked at him, mortified. There had been a catastrophe hidden in the folds of my contentment for two weeks and he hadn't even told me. It seemed unfair, although when I thought about it I could understand his reluctance, maybe even embarrassment, to draw my attention to something so stupidly unpleasant.

"Type it again."

I did, but I was so badly shaken that I made even more mistakes. "You are wasting my time," he said, and handed it to me once again. I typed it correctly the third time but he sulked in his office for the rest of the day. This kind of thing kept occurring all week. Each time, the lawyer's irritation and disbelief mounted. In addition, I sensed something else growing in him, an intimate tendril creeping from one of his darker areas, nursed on the feeling that he had discovered something about me.

I was very depressed about the situation. When I went home in the evening I couldn't take a nap. I lay there looking at the gray weather poodle and fantasized about having a conversation

with the lawyer that would clear up everything, explain to him that I was really trying to do my best. He seemed to think that I was making the mistakes on purpose.

At the end of the week he began complaining about the way I answered the phone. "You're like a machine," he said. "You sound like you're in the Twilight Zone. You don't think when you respond to people."

When he asked me to come into his office at the end of the day, I thought he was going to fire me. The idea was a relief, but a numbing one. I sat down and he fixed me with a look that was speculative but benign, for him. He leaned back in his chair in a comfortable way, one hand dangling sideways from his wrist. To my surprise, he began talking to me about my problems, as he saw them.

"I sense that you are a very nice but complex person, with wild mood swings that you keep hidden. You just shut up the house and act like there's nobody home."

"That's true," I said. "I do that."

"Well, why? Why don't you open up a little bit? It would probably help your typing."

It was really not any of his business, I thought.

"You should try to talk more. I know I'm your employer and we have a prescribed relationship, but you should feel free to discuss your problems with me."

The idea of discussing my problems with him was preposterous.

"It's hard to think of having that kind of discussion with you," I said. I hesitated. "You have a strong personality and ... when I encounter a personality like that, I tend to step back because I don't know how to deal with it."

He was clearly pleased with this response, but he said, "You shouldn't be so shy."

When I thought about this conversation later, it seemed, on the one hand, that this lawyer was just an asshole. On the other, his comments were weirdly moving, and had the effect of making me feel horribly sensitive. No one had ever made such personal comments to me before.

The next day I made another mistake. The intimacy of the previous day seemed to make the mistake even more repulsive to him because he got madder than usual. I wanted him to fire me. I would have suggested it, but I was struck silent. I sat and stared at the letter while he yelled. "What's wrong with you?"

"I'm sorry," I said.

He stood quietly for a moment. Then he said, "Come into my office. And bring that letter."

I followed him into his office.

"Put that letter on my desk," he said.

I did.

"Now bend over so that you are looking directly at it. Put your elbows on the desk and your face very close to the letter."

Shaken and puzzled, I did what he said.

"Now read the letter to yourself. Keep reading it over and over again."

I read: "Dear Mr. Garvy: I am very grateful to you for referring ..." He began spanking me as I said "referring". The funny thing was, I wasn't even surprised. I actually kept reading the letter, although my understanding of it was not very clear. I began crying on it, which blurred the ink. The word "humiliation" came into my mind with such force that it effectively blocked out all other words. Further, I felt that the concept it stood for had actually been a major force in my life for quite a while.

He spanked me for about ten minutes, I think. I read the letter only about five times, partly because it rapidly became too wet to be legible. When he stopped he said, "Now straighten up and go type it again."

I went to my desk. He closed the office door behind him. I sat down, blew my nose and wiped my face. I stared into space for several minutes, every now and then dwelling on the tingling sensation in my buttocks. I typed the letter again and took it into his office. He didn't look up as I put it on his desk.

I went back out and sat, planning to sink into a stupor of some sort. But a client came in, so I couldn't. I had to buzz the lawyer and tell him the client had arrived. "Tell him to wait," he said curtly.

When I told the client to wait, he came up to my desk and began to talk to me. "I've been here twice before," he said. "Do you recognize me?"

"Yes," I said. "Of course." He was a small, tight-looking middle-aged man with agitated little hands and a pale scar running over his lip and down his chin. The scar didn't make him look tough; he was too anxious to look tough.

"I never thought anything like this would ever happen to me," he said. "I never thought I'd be in a lawyer's office even once, and I've been here three times now. And absolutely nothing's been accomplished. I've always hated lawyers." He looked as though he expected me to take offense.

"A lot of people do," I said.

"It was either that or I would've shot those miserable blankety-blanks next door and I'd have to get a lawyer to defend me anyway. You know the story!"

I did. He was suing his neighbors because they had a dog that "barked all goddamn day." I listened to him talk. It surprised me how this short conversation quickly restored my sensibility. Everything seemed perfectly normal by the time the lawyer came out of his office to greet the client. I noticed he had my letter in one hand. Just before he turned to lead the client away, he handed it to me, smiling. "Good letter," he said.

When I went home that night, everything was the same. My life had not been disarranged by the event except for a slight increase in the distance between me and my family. My behind was not even red when I looked at it in the bathroom mirror.

But when I got into bed and thought about the thing, I got excited. I was more excited, in fact, than I had ever been in my life. That didn't surprise me, either. I felt a numbness, I felt that I could never have a normal conversation with anyone again. I masturbated slowly, to put off the climax as long as I could. But there was no climax, even though I tried for a long time. Then I couldn't sleep.

It happened twice more in the next week and a half. The following week, when I made a typing mistake, he didn't spank me. Instead, he told me to bend over his desk, look at the typing mistake and repeat "I am stupid" for several minutes.

Our relationship didn't change otherwise. He was still brisk and friendly in the morning. And, because he seemed so sure of himself, I could not help but react to him as if he were still the same domineering but affable boss. He did not, however, ever invite me to discuss my problems with him again.

I began to have recurring dreams about him. In one, the most frequent, I walked with him in a field of big bright red poppies. The day was brilliant and warm. We were smiling at each other, and there was a tremendous sense of release and goodwill between us. He looked at me and said, "I understand you now, Debby." Then we held hands.

There was one time I felt disturbed about what was happening at the office. It was just before dinner, and my father was upset about something that had happened to him at work. I could hear him yelling in the living room while my mother tried to comfort him. He yelled, "I'd rather work in a circus! In one of those things where you put your head through a hole and people pay to throw garbage at you!"

"No circus has that anymore," said my mother. "Stop it, Shep."

By the time I went down to eat dinner, everything was as usual. I looked at my father and felt a sickening sensation of love nailed to contempt and panic.

The last time I made a typing error and the lawyer summoned me to his office, two unusual things occurred. The first was that after he finished spanking me he told me to pull up my skirt. Fear hooked my stomach and pulled it toward my chest. I turned my head and tried to look at him.

"You're not worried that I'm going to rape you, are you?" he said. "Don't. I'm not interested in that, not in the least. Pull up your skirt."

I turned my head away from him. I thought, I don't have to do this. I can stop right now. I can straighten up and walk out. But I didn't. I pulled up my skirt.

"Pull down your pantyhose and underwear."

A finger of nausea poked my stomach.

"I told you I'm not going to fuck you. Do what I say."

The skin on my face and throat was hot, but my fingertips were cold on my legs as I pulled down my underwear and panty hose. The letter before me became distorted beyond recognition. I thought I might faint or vomit, but I didn't. I was held up by a feeling of dizzying suspension, like the one I have in dreams where I can fly, but only if I get into some weird position.

At first he didn't seem to be doing anything.

Then I became aware of a small frenzy of expended energy behind me. I had an impression of a vicious little animal frantically burrowing dirt with its tiny claws and teeth. My hips were sprayed with hot sticky muck.

"Go clean yourself off," he said. "And do that letter again."

I stood slowly, and felt my skirt fall over the sticky gunk. He briskly swung open the door and I left the room, not even pulling up my panty hose and underwear, since I was going to use the bathroom anyway. He closed the door behind me, and the second unusual thing occurred. Susan, the paralegal, was standing in the waiting room with a funny look on her face. She was a blonde who wore short, fuzzy sweaters and fake gold jewelry around her neck. At her friendliest, she had a whining, abrasive quality that clung to her voice. Now, she could barely say hello. Her stupidly full lips were parted speculatively.

"Hi," I said. "Just a minute."

She noted the awkwardness of my walk, because of the lowered panty hose.

I got to the bathroom and wiped myself off. I didn't feel embarrassed. I felt mechanical. I wanted to get that dumb paralegal out of the office so I could come back to the bathroom and masturbate.

Susan completed her errand and left. I masturbated. I retyped the letter. The lawyer sat in his office all day.

When my mother picked me up that afternoon, she asked me if I was all right.

"Why do you ask?"

"I don't know. You look a little strange."

"I'm as all right as I ever am."

"That doesn't sound good, honey."

I didn't answer. My mother moved her hands up and down the steering wheel, squeezing it anxiously.

"Maybe you'd like to stop by the French bakery and get some elephant ears" she said.

"I don't want any elephant ears." My voice was unexpectedly nasty. It almost made me cry.

"All right," said my mother.

When I lay on my bed to take my nap, my body felt very dense and heavy, as though it would be very hard to move again, which was just as well, since I didn't feel like moving. When Donna banged on my door and yelled "Dinner!" I didn't answer. She put her head in and asked if I was asleep, and I told her I didn't feel like eating. I felt so inert, I thought I'd go to sleep, but I couldn't. I lay awake through the sounds of argument and TV and everybody going to the bathroom. Bedtime came, drawers rasped open and shut, doors slammed, my father eased into sleep with radio mumble. The orange digits on my clock said 1:30. I thought: I should get out of this pantyhose and slip. I sat up and looked out into the gray, cold street. The shrubbery on the lawn across the street looked frozen and miserable. I thought about a period of time a year before when I couldn't sleep because I kept thinking that someone was going to break into the house and kill everybody. Eventually that fear went away and I went back to sleeping again. I lay back down without taking off my clothes, and pulled a light blanket tightly around me. Sooner or later, I thought, I would sleep. I would just have to wait.

But I didn't sleep, although I became mentally incoherent for long, ugly stretches of time. Hours went by; the room turned gray. I heard the morning noises: the toilet, the coughing, Donna's hostile muttering. Often, in the past, I had woken early and lain in bed listening to my family clumsily trying to organize itself for the day. Often as not, their sounds made me feel irrational loathing. This morning, I felt despair and a longing for them, and a sureness that we would never be close as long as I lived. My nasal passages became active with tears that didn't reach my eyes.

My mother knocked on the door. "Honey, aren't you going to be late?"

"I'm not going to work. I feel sick. I'll call in."

"I'll do it for you, just stay in bed."

"No, I'm going to call. It has to be me."

I didn't call in. The lawyer didn't call the house.

I didn't go in or call the next day or the day after that. The lawyer still didn't call. I was slightly hurt by his absent phone call, but my relief was far greater than my hurt.

After I'd stayed home for four days, my father asked if I wasn't worried about taking so much time off. I told him I'd quit, in front of Donna and my mother. He was dumbfounded.

"That wasn't very smart," he said. "What are you going to do now?"

"I don't care," I said. "That lawyer was an asshole." To everyone's discomfort, I began to cry. I left the room, and they all watched me stomp up the stairs.

The next day at dinner my father said, "Don't get discouraged because your first job didn't work out. There're plenty of other places out there."

"I don't want to think about another job right now."

There was disgruntlement all around the table.

"Come on now Debby, you don't want to throw away everything you worked for in that typing course," said my father.

"I don't blame her," said Donna. "I'm sick of working for assholes."

"Oh, shit," said my father. "If I had quit every job I've had on those grounds, you would've all starved. Maybe that's what I should have done."

"What happened, Debby?" said my mother.

I said, "I don't want to talk about it," and I left the room again. After that they may have sensed, with their intuition for the miserable, that something hideous had happened. Because they left the subject alone.