

Copy services at Bird Library had a new supervisor in the spring of 1978. Maxine had moved to technical services, where the library books and periodicals were purchased, received, and catalogued. The huge room had clusters of desks for each technical service division, such as acquisitions, data entry, serials, and cataloging. The center of the room contained an island of computers that the librarians called CRTs, cathode-ray tubes, for short, and they were used to catalog the books and periodicals. The card catalog cabinets stretched from the island of CRTs to the double-doors that led to the bathrooms, employee lounge, and the elevators. Several offices lined the periphery of the room, and one door led into the back of copy services. Ronald and I knew Mary, the new supervisor, because she had been the media services secretary, and copy services was part of media services. Mary, in her mid-twenties, was almost six feet tall, a linebacker with long, fine, blonde hair and pale-blue eyes. Her voice was a whisper, soft and airy. She had a twin sister nicknamed Bug who looked exactly like her, unless you studied the shapes of their faces, and you realized that Bug's face was softer at the edges and smaller than Mary's. Mary and Bug made all their own dresses: the same empire-waisted dress pattern with long, belled sleeves, but in different solids and prints. The personalized license plate of their shared station wagon announced their avocation: QUILTERS.

"Oh, your poor mother," I had said to Mary upon realizing that the person I was waving to on campus was Bug and not Mary, and that was why she didn't wave back.

"Why do you feel sorry for my mother?" Mary asked.

"To have twins for her firstborns. It must have been very difficult for her as a new mother," I said.

One day she would laugh at me, looking at my belly circumference that nearly matched my height, when I, too, would have twins for my firstborn children. A few weeks before I went on maternity leave, Mary would throw her arm around my waist, heft me up like a sack of grain, and walk across a runnel of rainwater rushing toward the street drain, making sure I got safely across. All in good humor, she and Bug made quilts and stuffed teddy bears for my set of twins.

I told Mary my plight when I went to pick up my paycheck.

"I have one more summer position open," she said, "You and Ron can work all summer, full-time hours."

I broke the news to Ma in a letter.

The copy center was walled by glass that looked out on the periodicals department. Often, as Ronald and I stood at the copy machines, we watched one of the library administrators walking by, his head turned in our direction. One day, he slipped in the front door and told Mary he wanted to talk to her.

The administrator came up to Mary's chest. He was a white man in his mid-fifties, a strip of hair running from one ear around the back of his bulbous head to the other ear, and his suit was a grayish green. The rumor was that his hero was Winston Churchill. He had read every one of his books and all

biographies about him. He must have fancied himself Churchill-like, his finger resting in the watch pocket of his vest. He also imagined himself as a wise and desirable mentor to young, white, female employees in his charge. I thought he was creepy.

“I’ve had complaints,” he said to Mary.

“Complaints?” Mary echoed. She dwarfed him in every dimension, and her usually-soft features looked menacing.

“Those two can’t work together,” he said, nudging his chin toward Ronald and me, standing behind copy machines side by side.

“Who can’t work together?” Mary asked, her voice losing its whispery quality. Ronald and I looked at each other, then back to the scene playing in front of us. We kept the copy machines humming, turning pages of the books from which we were copying, flipping the books over and flattening their spines so the copies would not be black on the bound edge of the pages. We did this without looking down, our eyes fixed on Mary and the administrator.

“One of them has to work in technical services,” he said, pointing at us.

“They are my students,” Mary said, leaning toward the man. He looked down at the counter separating them.

“It’s voluntary. Otherwise, someone will have to be fired,” he said. “I told you people have complained.”

Mary picked up a ruler from her desk. She used it to slap her palm to emphasize each word. “Who complained?” she said, slapping the ruler twice.

“People,” he said, “I can’t say who.”

“The ubiquitous *they*,” she said, slapping her palm again on each syllable, her voice seeming to bounce off the walls and glass.

The administrator stepped backward. I looked through the glass into the periodicals department and noticed all eyes, students and staff, were turned to copy services. Everyone had heard Mary’s whispery voice turn dangerous.

“And what did *they* say their complaint was?” she said, continuing to slap her palm with the ruler. Now it was a constant slap, slap, slap.

The administrator stared at the ruler. I think Mary was imitating some nuns she knew, or at least one or two that I had run into during Sunday school classes, and his expression and posture told me the administrator had attended Catholic school.

“I can’t say,” he said, his voice faltering. Then, he straightened his spine and looked up at her.

“I’ve spoken,” he said. “I want an answer within the hour. Someone is working out back in technical services.” He turned and reached for the door.

“Oh, you’ll get an answer,” Mary said.

“No,” I said, staring at the administrator, my copy machine now silent. “I’ve got an answer now. I quit!”

“You can’t quit,” he said, turning to look at me.

“No, she can’t quit,” Ronald said, “because I quit.”

“I still quit,” I said.

The man stood rooted in his spot, still reaching for the door handle.

“I quit, too!” said Steve. Steve was the night manager. He had only started his shift an hour earlier. Wispy and bespectacled, he sat behind the microfilm reader/printer. It seemed we had all forgotten he was there.

“Are the ubiquitous *they* being hired on as my new staff?” Mary asked, the ruler slapping fast and furious now.

The administrator dropped his hand to his side and turned to face Mary.

“Okay, drop it for now, but don’t think this is over,” he said. He quickly turned, opened the door and slammed it behind him.

We watched him through the glass as he marched across the carpeted floor in the periodicals department and up the center stairway. When we could no longer see his feet, students and staff in the periodicals department started applauding, and we burst out laughing.

I guess he never worked on the weekends, when Ronald and I ran the Copy Center during the school year, beginning our sophomore year. But during the summer, working Monday through Friday, leaving for lunch together through the exit that was right next to his windowed office, he definitely took notice. This would be the first time I realized that racism, or just plain hate, could impact our ability to earn a living. I also realized that both Ronald and I would act against such actions to protect our relationship.

The administrator returned the next day to the front counter. I looked at him as I sat in Mary’s desk chair with my legs folded under me so I was high enough to comfortably sort change. I fed the coins from the pay copy machines out in the library into a chute that sorted them to be put in paper tubes for the bank deposit.



*At the desk in copy services, circa 1978*

“I will work in technical services,” I said. “It’s not voluntary, but involuntary.”

“You aren’t the one,” he said.

“I am. I’m volunteering to go involuntarily.”

His face turned red. I got up, turned my back on him, and left through the back door, slamming it. I filed at the technical services card catalog for about forty-five minutes before Mary poked her head out the back door and told me to come back to work. The administrator never bothered us again, except to puff his chest out and sneer as he passed by the copy center glass.

We lost touch over the years, but I have always been thankful to Mary for sticking up for us, because many people didn’t. When I heard she had passed away in February 2019, I posted her obituary on Facebook and wrote that she would always be part of our story.