

Working Girl

By Maggie Handsley

I worked on the Lane, Manningham Lane. It was a posh area at one time. You had a high-class clientele in those days. Mill people mainly who made cotton velvet and Yorkshire worsted, the best in the world. It was all big houses and the smell of success.

Course things changed. Let's face it, they always do. The big houses crumbled round the edges and filled up with incomers of one sort or another. There were Jews, then Italians, then Jamicans and Asians. Nowadays there's even a Czech Deli and a Polish grocer on every street corner.

I'll tell you something, though; it makes life interesting. I learnt a thing or two in my time. You wouldn't believe what some of those men got up to; all sorts of peculiar ideas. Well, we all have our own ways of doing things, don't we? And there were always plenty of opportunities for a girl in my line of work.

I had customers in all walks of life, you know, but it was the restaurants that brought in the most business.

I picked up regular work from the Italian coffee bar. It was popular with nostalgic old men, full of their own manlihood and self-importance. They always thought they were up the job but couldn't always deliver. You could get a good Pizza Marguerita, though, or an all-day breakfast with a half carafe of Chianti. Ask for a 'special' and you'd get a shot of grappa in your coffee.

The Lion Caff was busy anall. Young black men with attitude. They hung out, played pool, smoked joints and picked up girls on the game. I didn't usually go there myself but I did get special requests, usually on a weekend. You couldn't afford to be too choosy when it came down to business.

Then there was the Tex Mex, not that there's ever been any Mexicans in Manningham, but the refried beans were reliable and the wine cheap. The décor was dowdy but it was fairly central with quite a bit of lunchtime business goes on. You met a variety of customer from executives to students, attracted by the two for one deals. They must have got through a lot of beans.

Course Saturdays were hectic, particularly at the Belle Vue. It's right opposite Valley Parade so they got hordes of blokes in drinking a skinfull after a match, especially if it had been a good one. And we all know what that leads to, don't we? There was an inevitable call on my services, usually about teatime. Not the nicest way to spend your Saturday evening but, I have to say, the money was good.

All in all, it wasn't a bad life. I did well for myself. Always was independent, never took a penny off anybody. Eventually, though, it comes to us all; I got a bit long in the tooth and reluctantly packed up my kit. But I look back on those years of working with a certain fondness. It was nice to be needed. And, you know what? I do feel a glow of womanly pride when I think, for long enough, I was the only female plumber in Bradford.