

Nine Women

by Michael D. Brown

Lucy often asked me if I was seeing anyone. I never believed she was interested in starting up a relationship with me, though, she never mentioned being involved with her friend Steve until maybe three or four months after I knew her. I think she just felt an ability to pry and thought I wouldn't see it as such.

Alice often said she and her husband had barbecues over the summer and she invited me to attend if I had no other plans. She told me I could bring anyone I wanted with me. She stressed the words any one. I was sure I heard them as two separate words.

When I saw Vicky reading a mystery novel, I asked her if she only read fiction. She said, "No, sometimes I like to read about true crimes." I asked her if she had ever read *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* or if she had seen the movie made from it. She said, "Is that the one about the fag?" I asked her if she had ever read any Patricia Highsmith novels. She said, "Who?"

Julie asked me not to take her picture when I brought my camera into the office. I had taken shots of most of the other women. When I tried to cajole her into letting me include her in a shot, she asked me, "Haven't you ever had some little thing you would rather everyone just left you alone about? I don't like to have my picture taken. Please don't ask me again." She did not attend the Christmas party so I couldn't catch her off guard even after a few drinks.

Thalicia often asked me about ways to make the work move more speedily. She was a quick learner, but like me she was a bit of a slacker and would rather not have to work very hard to get things done. Any shortcuts that were not obvious to our supervisors were always welcomed. When I left the company, she moved into the unofficial slot of being the person with the computer answers.

Numatee was a dream to work with. She never asked personal questions. We shared an interest in cartoons, which was kind of silly for two people over thirty, but there you have it. We both especially

enjoyed Herge's Adventures of Tintin. Tintin is practically sexless and therefore a very safe subject.

I never asked any of these women what they did at home when they were on their own time. Nor did I show much interest in their husbands or fiances.

Arlene was my boss from the beginning though her position slowly was refined into being of less authority by the time I left than it had been when she interviewed me for the job. I did many personal favors for her which we worked in around company time, starting before nine and putting the jobs aside shortly after, to be picked up shortly before five and sometimes staying as late as six-thirty. We printed beautiful invitations for her church's bazaar on the company's laser-jet printer. She always supplied the card stock. She also frequently asked me to barbecues and told me I might bring whomever I wanted, but I always took rain checks. Her husband, a former roadie for rock bands, who told offensive racial jokes at the Christmas party was coolly cordial to me. I didn't feel the invitations came from both of them.

Susan usually asked me if the work was up to date and it almost never was. There was so much to do and so little time to do it. I worried about so many things. As Arlene's authority diminished Susan's, who was on equal footing when I was hired, was augmented until she was the manager of the entire department. She never asked questions of a personal nature, not with her voice at least. Her eyes were always aglow with the knowledge that what she perceived had better not be questioned in return.

Before Betty retired, or as she would say, was asked to retire early, she frequently asked me, "When you getting married kiddo? We oughta go to lunch sometime, that is, if you don't mind being seen eating with an old lady." We never did have lunch together while she or I worked there. But we did sit next to each other at one of the Christmas dinners.

I left the company in September when I was selected to be on a grand jury. I soon acquired a part-time job that was manageable. I mean I was not expected to bend over backwards to perform

impossible tasks. I met several nice people whose only interests appeared to be what movies we both liked, how much we knew about Manhattan and whether or not either of us had read certain articles in the Times or had seen specific television programs, in other words, a group of people like Numatee, who saw no need to pry. That part-time job provided a nice balance for the six months I attended grand jury hearings twice a week and listened to attorneys ask people the most embarrassing and invidious questions.

