

Fashion Beat



BATIK'D NATURALS

Billowing natural-color crinkle muslin top is yoked and sashed in a dark batik print (\$16). More natural: crinkle gauze pants to wrap or not at the ankle.

By Teddi of California, of cotton/polyester, 8-18. At: Macy's, Herald Square, New York; May Co., Southern California.

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MILE

AN OPINION

By Bette-Jane Raphael

ON BEING FIRED

Being fired, given the heave ho, getting the sack, being asked to leave, shipped out—whatever you call it, I've gotten it. For twelve years I've supported myself more or less continuously and suddenly I'm not doing it anymore. Suddenly, after being brought up in a family where bills had to be paid the day they arrived, where "not working" was synonymous with being dead, where charge accounts were frowned upon as being roses strewn along the path to financial ruin, suddenly, every other Wednesday between one thirty and two o'clock in the afternoon, I find myself standing in line and signing for a check which I have done nothing to earn. (I understand that the unemployment insurance I receive is something I have paid for in advance, via twelve years of paycheck deductions, but it still doesn't *feel* like I've earned it. Whenever I get to the front of the line I always expect Inspector Lestrade to jump out from behind a pillar, clap me in irons, and yell "Gotcha.") The people standing in line

ence between you. At least mine does. When I stand on that line, or when I sit in a plastic chair in the waiting area of an employment agency, or when I cash that unemployment check at my bank (thereby making the tellers privy to my reduced circumstances and status in the scheme of things), I have a tough time remembering that I have something personal and unique to offer the world and that I am not simply shouting "alms for the poor."

I think that's one of the hardest things about being out of work, the maintenance of a sense of self-worth, a belief that you are employable, perhaps even valuable. For me, at first, such a belief was as remote as glow-in-the-dark shoelaces. It didn't make any difference how or why I'd lost my job, whether it was because I'd actually loused things up, or the company had gone broke, or I was so terrific that my boss was worried I'd take over his job, or because my breath freshener smelled mediciney. It didn't matter whether I'd worked at

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with me have nothing in common as far as age, race, dress, prior job classification or even simple cleanliness is concerned. In fact the only thing that seems to unite them is their total lack of homogeneity—that and the fact that they are all unemployed.

For unemployment is the great leveler. Whether six months previously you were the King of Madison Avenue Advertising or the Queen of Fifth Avenue Fashion, you stand on the same line as the ex-busboy from Horn & Hardart's. And your ego has a tough time trying to convince you that there is any differ-

the firm ten years or six weeks. By my personal meter-reader, if I'd lost my job I had only myself to blame. And thus did I, a beloved daughter, a well-educated and well-therapied young woman, deposit a load of guilt squarely on my own shoulders. By a cunning maneuver of mind, I cleverly turned my job loss into a healthy helping of Mea Culpa (a Latin dish which I am incredibly adept at making). Although the woman who had to fire me from my job broke down in tears at losing me, although the reason for my dismissal was purely and demonstratively [continued on page 14]

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monetary, I managed to turn it into personal failure within 17 seconds.

This is a feat whose ability to perform I think I share with a lot of women. And the reason, I suspect, lies in the fact that while we were growing up a great many of us were subtly imbued with the idea that we couldn't take care of ourselves, that we couldn't make a living, and that, not to worry, some nice man would come along and do it for us. Consequently, when I lost my job, it seemed almost natural. It was merely the logical culmination to the fact that for twelve years I had successfully impersonated a valuable employee and that finally I had been found out, the true fraud that I was. (At this moment I am still amazed that the three people I have worked for over the years are even now giving me terrific references. What are they, crazy?)

The first week of my unemployment everybody told me that I should enjoy my freedom while I had it, that I should go to the movies in the afternoon, shop at Bloomingdale's during off-peak hours, spend a couple of weeks in San Francisco. How could I explain to these well wishers that in my family, not to work is almost as bad as not to eat, and that, therefore, if I were to go to San Francisco the only things I would pack in my suitcase would be a couple of wrinkled guilt dresses, appropriately made of sackcloth.

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Having nobody around is really a drag, and it's something you don't think about in the first flurry of a job loss. The first worry is usually money, how much you have and where you can get some more. The loneliness comes later, or for me it did. It came around my fourth week of being out of work, after a glorious job offer hadn't materialized, after I had had lunch at least twice with all of my working friends, and after the telephone had stopped ringing with people who "can't believe it," or "just heard," or "think you're well out of that place." Then, as the quiet settled down on my apartment like New York soot,

I realized that for the first time in my life I was really solitary: no parents or sibling around the house like when I was growing up; no roommate or friends darting in and out like they had at college; no people working a few feet away like at an office. In fact, I realized, there was hardly anybody around at all. My neighbors all go away to work, so on some days the closest thing to face-to-face human interchange and warmth came from the checker at D'Agostino's. (Food shopping became an important function, and I stretched it out by buying only one item at a time, to make sure that I would need something, *anything*, every day. If I couldn't find anything I needed at the supermarket/dry cleaner's/laundry/drug store, I'd make up things I had to do—like pick up that week's issue of *Awake*—to get out of my very quiet apartment and into the "real" world, which I had the uncomfortable feeling

was passing me by.) I started to find out why women get addicted to television soap operas. With my own daily world so relatively quiet and lacking in human interchange, it was tempting to get a hold on somebody else's life. Will Craig come back to Jill, who is innocent of committing adultery with Wade, even though they were seen alone together at Laurie's apartment by Betty, who had come there looking for Carl? This can become a very important question when it's raining, you have no job interview to go to, and all your friends are at work. Luckily, I was saved from complete immersion in the suds by the fact that, after watching them for three days, I realized that they had about as much "real life" in them as an ash tray. (I will simply pass over daytime TV game shows, which are terrifyingly awful and which show Americans at their depressing worst, all grab and greed.)

Another problem, I found, with being a no job shut-in was paranoia, which crept up on me when I hadn't heard from any of my friends for a couple of days and had instead received a nice note from somebody telling me I hadn't gotten a job I'd wanted (or hadn't wanted for that matter). This problem could best be countered, I learned, by having lunch with a friend, preferably a good one whom I could believe when she said I was crazy to be paranoid, that I was loved, and that I could do a job, any job, well, and that all I needed was to go out and find one, keep busy, and be active.

This was very good advice. Unfortunately, however, going out of the house held different, but just as fearsome, perils as those which faced me if I stayed home. Aside from the feeling that as soon as I left my apartment the phone would ring with somebody offering me a superb job—I handled that one by getting a phone answering machine—the really big trouble was that everyone, especially everyone in New York City, looks determined and harried and late for an appointment. To my eyes, at least, everybody else looked like they were in a hurry to get someplace, someplace, most probably, where they worked. If I went out in the morning, everybody looked like they were scurrying to their jobs; if I got out in the middle of the day, everyone looked like they were hurrying to lunch dates or, later on, back to their offices; and late in the day they all seemed to be hustling home or to an appointment from work. In [continued on page 55]



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other words, whenever I went out, unless it was to a job interview, it looked to me like I was the only person in New York who had no place where I *had* to be. This could be depressing.

The other problem about going out was that since I usually didn't have to be anywhere special, I had plenty of time to browse around and spend money in interesting boutiques and book stores, or in the gourmet sections of department stores. Which brings me back to another problem of staying at home: unlike the office, the home has a refrigerator, that lovely cold place in which food is stored, food which in my case was in dangerous proximity to my mouth. So there you are, or I was, on the horns of a dilemma: either stay home and get fat and paranoid, or go out and get poor and depressed. In my case I managed to do a little of both.

But if I had to choose one or the other, going out would get my vote. I have a writer friend who always works at home, and every morning she gets up at the same time, gets dressed, and goes out and buys a paper and a cup of coffee, all to, as she puts it, "get a feeling of what the day is like." Then she goes back home as if she were going to her office. She feels this gives a pattern to her day. I know what she means; I very much miss my structured office days. I envy her her ability to routinize her mornings. Unfortunately, at first, my own mornings leaned more toward Coca-Cola and a chenille bathrobe with a quick trip downstairs for the mail. There were even some days when I didn't get out at all until after dark, like Dracula.

But inside or outside, the worst part of being out of work, for me anyway, was trying to get back to *not* being out of work, i.e. finding a job. This was a horror. It started when my neighbors all threw away the classified section of their *Sunday Times*, my copy of which was conspicuously absent from the garbage until Tuesday. From there on it was answering ads, either sending my resume to box numbers or bringing it and myself to employment agencies, the latter being another example of instant unemployment levelization. *Everybody, everywhere* fills out the same forms, be you an ex-bank president or a onetime wrapper at Macy's. And as I meandered from box number to box number and from agency to agency and prospective employer to prospective employer, my ego, which, after losing a job wasn't at its high point in the first place, did a perfectly executed swan dive from not so hot to the pits.

At first I felt pretty confident about getting a job; in fact I was fairly certain I would get one before I was out of work two weeks. After all, I was good at my job (wasn't I?), I had good experience (didn't I?), and I had great ref-



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erences (no question there, due to those crazy ex-employers). People, I reasoned, would be lining up in front of my apartment building holding up chests of money, coffers of status, dreams of glory, all anxious, frenzied, to have me in their employ.

But I opened the door that first Monday morning and, guess what, nobody was there. I quickly surmised that they had all found out what I had secretly known all along—that I was worthless—so I started going to their doors and, as my ego took that aforementioned dive, I started being shattered even when I didn't get jobs I didn't really want. I even started worrying about my age. Maybe because I was over thirty nobody would ever want to hire me again. Maybe the job I'd lost was the last job I'd ever have. Maybe I would go through my savings, lose my apartment and all my friends, and become one of those women who live out of shopping bags and sleep in Grand Central Station. (Let me tell you, being out of work gives you plenty of time to fantasize, both for good and for ill.)

Thankfully, that, like the dreams of glory, hasn't materialized. What has materialized, over the past eight weeks or so, is a sense of my own priorities, as opposed to the priorities imposed on me by a job. I have begun to learn how much I need or do not need people, privacy, material things and financial security, daily organization and exercise. I have widened my circle of friends to include women whose schedules are as flexible as my own. I have learned to enjoy my own company and respond to my own needs rather than panic at the thought of being alone. I have learned to cherish this job interim (I am certain now that the right new job will come along in time) and savor these not unemployed, but rather free days, to enjoy them as my friends first wished I would do. I have learned to like and be good to myself and to distinguish between what I want and do not want to do, who I want and do not want as my friends, how I would like and would not like to spend any single given day. I have learned how delicious it can be to walk through the quiet streets of my own neighborhood doing relatively unimportant errands at eleven o'clock on a brisk, bright day in the late fall.

Learning these things, I am beginning to lean toward a philosophy my mother has always voiced. "Bette," she always says when anything bad, like losing a job, happens, "who knows, it may be a blessing in disguise."

Bette-Jane Raphael has been an actress, a magazine editor and, now, a freelance writer.