

## Why I'll Never Have One of Those Legendary, Loyal Secretaries

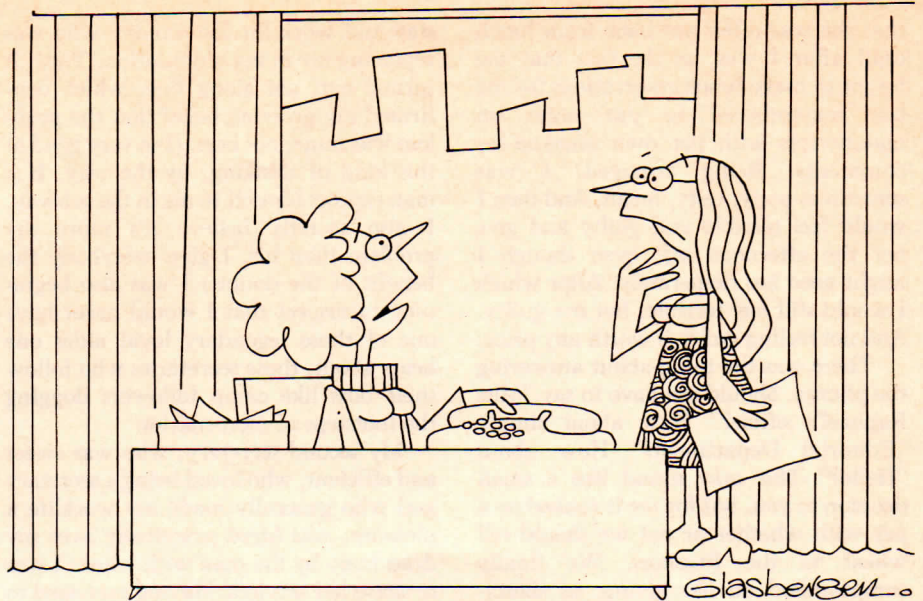
by Bette-Jane Raphael

*The ability to command easily and with grace was not inbred in some of us women. We have got to acquire it, and so far I haven't the knack.*

**M**y first job was on a magazine, working for a woman who wore stockings with seams, dresses with matching jackets, hats with little veils on them and sensible shoes. To anybody who has ever seen me in my lucky sneakers, it would be obvious that this woman and I had little in common. The reason she hired me in the first place eludes me to this day. However, I do know why I wanted the job, even for the meager \$75.00 a week it offered. I was more than willing to sacrifice perhaps \$25.00 per for the chance to be called "editorial assistant" and not secretary, a designation which at the time conjured up for me the movie-inspired image of someone with a Brooklyn accent chatting on the phone while alternately filing her nails and eating a cruller. (Since I was indeed from Brooklyn — and since I was even more indeed a snob — I was particularly sensitive to this image.)

For \$75.00 a week I was in the category of "bright beginner with chance for advancement" (or, more accurately, "brt. bgnr. w chnc for advncmnt."), side-stepping secretary as neatly as Gene Kelly side-steps rain puddles. Oh yes, I still had an inside office through which anyone wanting to see my boss had to pass, and I did have to make reservations for banquet luncheons at the Cafe Richelieu which I could not myself attend, and I did have to Xerox manuscripts by, and be pleasant to, authors whose work I thought was dreck, but on the other hand I could sign letters "assistant editor," I could read through the unsolicited manuscript pile in a (usually vain) search for genius, I could write blurbs and captions for story layouts, and I could (and did) meet a young author who would take my virginity and break my heart.

And so we put up with each other, this woman and I, even though I felt my talents were tragically underutilized and she felt, I'm sure, that I could stand to be more of a secretary and less of a "bright beginner." She was not unkind to me, just unsympathetic.



My second boss, who did not choose me but inherited me from my first boss when she took over the former's job, was one of those blessings God sometimes grants to us in this world whether we deserve them or not. She got me raises, she let me read manuscripts that mattered, and she made sure everyone knew if I had written a blurb or a brilliant piece for editorial analysis, if I had found some material for the magazine, or, for that matter, if I had lost five pounds. She was kind and generous to me, and while I still hated typing letters, I no longer felt degraded by the act of putting finger to key, nor by the fact that I had to answer the phone with "Miss So-and-so's office" instead of "hello." She was unfailingly good-tempered with me even though my feeling that being a secretary was beneath me made me, naturally enough, mediocre at the job. To this day I would willingly Xerox the Bible for her.

From these two women I learned many things about being a secretary and about being a boss with a secretary, but most of it flew out the window when the time came for me to hire one for myself. When that day arrived I suddenly came face to face with the only authority in the world I had never recognized — my own. It was not a confrontation I relished. Power, my own power, made me uncomfortable.

I side-stepped the issue entirely by deciding to hire a potential friend instead of an efficient secretary. So I went and hired a younger version of myself, someone who hated answering phones and Xeroxing manuscripts and typing letters, someone who had an opinion on everything, from the stories I commissioned for the magazine to the grammar I used in my correspondence, someone who was bright and, ultimately, a pain in the ass.

It wasn't her fault; it was mine. I simply couldn't handle the worry of both my own and her job satisfaction plus her opinion of me. Does a man worry about whether or not his secretary thinks he's a crumb? Somehow I don't think so, at least the one man I worked for didn't seem to care much. He sent me for coffee daily, had me buy his Christmas presents, help decorate his office and send away for size 20½ dresses for his mother. I also did his banking, paid his bills, argued on his behalf with the people at the Diners Club, and helped arrange his dinner parties. But since the job itself was so bilious, I didn't mind doing those things. I mean I like shopping, and I don't like typing, so when it came to a choice between going over to Saks on an extended lunch hour to buy his friend a present, or answering the phones, you can bet I wouldn't be at the old receiver. I never felt I was being abused, and I wonder if it had something to do with my belief that he was, after all, a man, a helpless bachelor who really needed me to keep his scattered life together. There was a certain amount of satisfaction in this.

But, I vowed, no young woman would ever have to do that for me. I'd buy my own coffee, thank you very much. Unfortunately, I never remembered to buy coffee in the morning. My secretary, however, always bought herself some when the coffee wagon came around every morning, and she naturally asked me if I wanted any, and I said yes. And pretty soon I was looking forward to that cup of coffee, and when she started bringing in her own from the outside and not buying it either for herself or for me when the wagon came around, I was annoyed.

I was annoyed at a lot of things. At her grammatical suggestions, at the fact

that she was often not back from lunch until after I was, at the fact that she forgot to make lunch reservations for me but remembered to put notes on manuscripts with her own unasked-for comments. Being annoyed, I was sometimes petty, testy, mean. And then I would feel terrible and guilty and give her the afternoon off, even though I might need her desperately. After which I would still feel terrible, but not guilty. And not feeling guilty is worth any price.

There was the thing about answering the phones. Should she have to say "Miss Raphael's office?" How about simply "Editorial Department?" How about "Hello?" This may sound like a small decision to you, but for me it ranked on a par with whether or not we should sell wheat to the Russians. We finally compromised on her giving, as salutation, the name of the publication where we were employed, which was not, thank heavens, *Screw*. But neither of us was really happy. I felt my image as a rising young executive was not being communicated forcefully enough to all the important people who called me, like my dermatologist's nurse and my cleaner's delivery boy. And she, I'm certain, felt demeaned.

I wish I could say that one day this young woman and I had a wonderfully cleansing heart-to-heart which resolved all our differences and enabled us to work in complete harmony from then on. Unfortunately the fact is that we never really resolved our problems, and when I eventually moved to another position in the company, we opted to part, she to

stay and work for the woman who was replacing me in my old position. They, it turned out, got along fine, which confirmed my growing belief that the problem was mine, not hers. (I'm very good at this kind of thinking, by the way. If a man exposes himself to me in the subway, I also secretly believe it's more my problem than his. I give everybody the benefit of the doubt.) I was also beginning to suspect that I would never have one of those legendary loyal aides one hears about, those secretaries who follow their boss like camp followers dogging the footsteps of mercenaries.

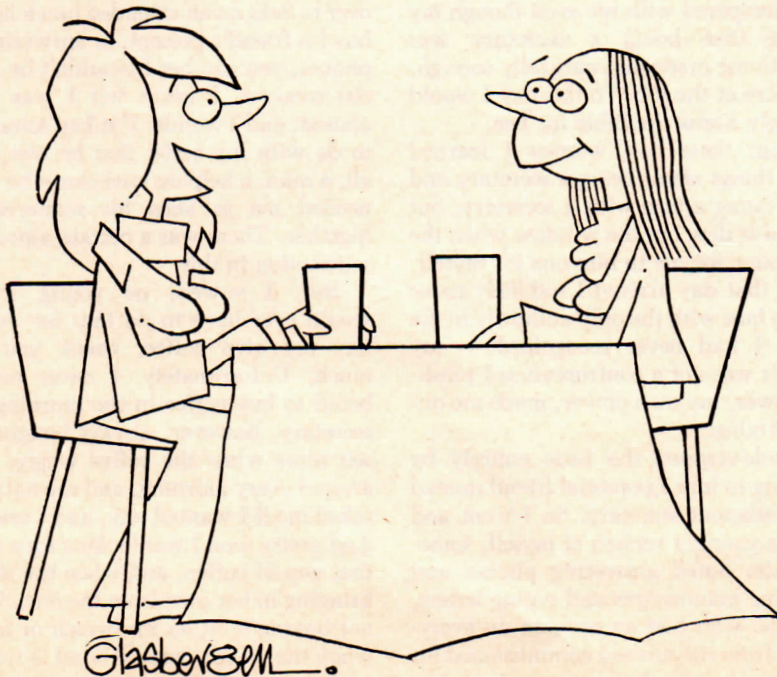
My second secretary, who was sweet and efficient, who loved being a secretary and who generally made my worklife a pleasure, was hired practically over my dead body by the man with whom I was to share her services. Having managed to learn absolutely nothing from experience, I was still looking for friendship rather than skill. "She's not hip enough," I had argued. "She likes to ski! In Colorado, for chrissakes." "Trust me," the man said, and I did.

The young woman started to work for us, and she was, to use the proverbial employer's expression, a jewel. She was perennially reliable and easy going, seemingly as happy answering telephones as she was turning out a perfectly typed letter. (My first secretary had tended to make a letter look like something that had been found in a bottle at the bottom of the ocean.) Nothing about the job rattled the jewel. Except for one thing, however: Me. I could not get over the notion that this young woman was my mis-

sion, that it was my job to infuse her with ambition, raise her consciousness and realign her politics. "Why can't you leave well enough alone?" the fellow who had coaxed me to hire her asked. "Why can't you be happy working with someone who's different from you, who isn't a budding Barbara Walters?" I knew he was right, but I couldn't seem to stop trying to shape her in my own (not to mention Barbara Walter's) image, not until the day she left us to work for a nonprofit foundation which did something like sponsor scholarships for indigent skiers and promised to send her to Vail twice a year.

My third secretary I again hired myself, so she turned out to be remarkably similar to my first secretary: Bright, ambitious and draining. I was, I'm afraid, still looking more for a soulmate than a secretary, and more for approval than for skills applied in my behalf. This time, however, I succeeded in getting what I thought I wanted. At last I had found a friend. The trouble was that we found we liked each other so much that we usually got more accomplished in the way of conversation than in the way of work. Which was a problem, because work was the thing we were being paid to do, and when, inevitably, we *had* to work, I felt funny about asking her to do things, about turning from good ole BJR into The Boss. I invariably became either cajoling or sternly demanding, neither of which endeared me to her. Luckily, our story had a happy ending. I decided to leave the job before our growing friendship was completely shredded. (This was not the *cause* of my leaving, understand. Even I will go just so far to be liked.) And we were able to retain our relationship outside the office, where, I rather suspect, it belonged in the first place.

It would be nice to report that, finally, I have learned the ins and outs of being a boss. But I haven't. I'm still as rotten at it as I ever was. For one thing, it lessens my chances of ever running ITT. Power still frightens and confuses me. I was born before the revolution, after all, and was taught to please rather than direct, to follow rather than lead. The ability to command easily and with grace was not inbred in some of us women who grew up in sheath skirts. We have got to acquire it, and so far I haven't gotten the knack. However, even though I'm still a terrible person to work for, even though I still have a quixotic, near schizophrenic need to be loved while at the same time serviced, and am alternately overbearing and overindulgent, things are easier these days — now that I'm self-employed. □



"I'm postponing marriage to pursue my career, so I guess the 'something old' at my wedding will be me."

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