

Making Changes

By Patricia Hilliard

Chapter 1

First Impressions

Job-hunting was becoming a full time occupation for Ellen Anderson. She stood before the entrance of the American Empire Insurance Company about to experience yet another job interview. The economy was in a crisis. The chance of being hired had the same terrible odds as winning a billion-dollar lottery.

The American Empire Insurance Company was a worldwide corporation with its main headquarters in New York and a major office in Cleveland on Prospect Street. Behind the company's tall marble, glass and metal walls, hundreds of women and men endured the most tedious work to earn the money needed to buy life's necessities and small pleasures. Ellen Anderson wished she could join them.

After entering the thick glass doors of the American Empire Insurance Company, Ellen Anderson took the elevator to the floor of the Human Resources Office. She mentally ran a checklist of herself. She was dressed appropriately as an office worker. She had chosen to wear her gray all-season suit, accented with her modest silver teardrop earrings and a matching necklace. Her basic black purse and polished black shoes conformed to office dress code. She wore only a little make-up and her short light brown hair had been cut into a sophisticated style that made her look neat and efficient. Like with so many other interviews, she lifted her head in a confident manner and reassured herself that she had the skills to do the job. She was certain that her job history was excellent. For seven years she had been accurately typing data into computer memory banks and getting paid a modest but livable wage for this tedious work.

Ellen entered the Human Resources Office and was greeted by a receptionist who offered her a clipboard containing an application form. Sitting on one of the hard wooden chairs, Ellen penned in the pertinent information as she had done so many times before.

"Lisa, you keep telling me this "sick baby" story. I have reason to believe that you were out of town Sunday night having a good time. You didn't get back until the middle of the night so today you are late for work. This has got to stop or we will terminate you."

Ellen could not believe her ears. The threat she had just heard came from the doorway with a plaque above it reading: Connie Collins, Human Resources Director. The angry words made Ellen's stomach tighten. She never liked hearing employers scolding their employees. Sobbing sounds seemed to come from the room, then in the doorway stood a young woman, stylishly dressed, but with her eye make-up smudged from crying. Ellen felt immediate sympathy for this unknown woman who only glared at Ellen. She made a face as if to say, "You're a fool if you want to work here." Ellen read the pained expression on the young woman's face and felt like walking out. However, in her economic situation, there seemed no possibility for sympathy toward others. Instead, she promised herself she would do better. She

stayed and handed her application to the receptionist who handed it through another doorway to someone else.

"You may go in now," the receptionist told Ellen. Feeling nervous, Ellen picked up her purse and entered.

A man dressed in a typical business suit introduced himself as the employment counselor and asked her to be seated. He didn't look at her nice clothes, as they usually did in interviews, instead he perused the application form she had filled out. While she waited, she noticed that his brown suit was not so typical after all. It was worn and frayed.

When he looked up from her application, he said, "Follow me," and led her through a maze of stairs and halls to the Data Entry Department where he greeted a woman supervisor.

"Violet, this is Ellen. Could you show her around and tell her a little about the job."

Violet smiled pleasantly. She was about 60 years old and wearing a floral print dress complimented by a small jacket in a solid pink. She was sitting at a desk, which indicated her supervisory capacity. The other seventy women in the room sat at computers entering data from the insurance company's clients. The women and computers stretched out in rows across the gray carpeted floor. The room's redeeming quality was the windows on three sides. On the windowsills were potted African violets in various hues from pink to purple. Ellen liked the airy brightness of the room, the simple, but colorful, flowers and the supervisor's cheerfulness. However, Ellen still held doubt in her heart that she would be offered the job.

"The work we do here is easy," Violet explained.

Ellen immediately noticed an accent, possibly Eastern European, in Violet's voice.

"I like to make happy the girls, so in the windows, I put violets. You can remember my name that way. Violets and Violet. So what do you think, would you like to work here?"

"The flowers are beautiful," Ellen replied politely. "You made the office look very nice. Yes, I would like working here."

"You look like the kind of worker we are looking for. Go back to Human Resources and I will have a talk with them."

After a few wrong turns in hallways unknown to her, Ellen returned to the man with the worn brown suit at the Human Resources office.

"So now that you've seen the job location and you understand what the work is, are you interested in the position? How well do you like typing? Typing is all that you will do in this position," he said.

"Oh, it's fine," she answered. In the past she had heard a supervisor say that "girls," as they persisted in calling women workers, liked to work with their hands. So, Ellen added, "I like to work with my hands."

It was powerful. She saw him smile, pleased with her attitude. He explained the rules of the company and mentioned some details about a few of the benefits--for they were few.

"Do you think you want this job?" he asked.

She nodded.

He told her the rate of pay.

She frowned.

"Couldn't I have just a little more per hour?" she asked.

Glaring, he leaned forward in his seat. "Everyone says that. I'm so sick of hearing it. This is the job, do you want it or not?"

"I'll take it," she replied.

He looked pleased, "Good. Start Monday."

Start Monday! Back on the street, Ellen whispered the words to herself. She felt so surprised. She had a job. She could finally do what she wanted to do with her life. She promised herself she would be the best employee they ever had. She would get them to trust her and after that, she would do to them what she did best. They would never forget her.

Though it seemed like a normal day, Violet did not know the changes Ellen could bring. She watched as Ellen departed the Data Entry Department, then signaled to her friend Marguerite, to join her at the end of the hall.

“We have just hired a new girl. She will take a load off you. She’s young and energetic.

Marguerite looked relieved. “I’m glad to hear it. You know, I am looking forward to retirement.”

“Oh me too,” Violet sighed. She had only a few more years until she could retire. But after that there would be big decisions to make. She had read in a letter from her sister in Yugoslavia that retirement there was so much better. Yugoslavia was a socialist state, although they had gone a long ways toward becoming more capitalist, like America, but the socialist side of things still looked better for retired people. Violet worried that here in the United States she would not receive enough money to live at her comfort level. Violet pondered other ways of earning money. If none could be found, she might have to consider going back to Yugoslavia to live with her sister. It would be great to see her sister and old friends as well as their old neighborhood once more before passing on.

Violet came to this country in 1940 at the age of 20. Her parents wanted to avoid the political turmoil that was going on in Belgrade. Later, Violet, a name she gave herself, married the son of another family that had traveled with them. He became a metallurgist for the Cleveland steel industry. He made good money and was able to travel from time to time to Yugoslavia for business in steel and metals. He and Violet had a son. Their lives were the American Dream in its fullest, complete with a big house and lots of friends. Then suddenly her husband died at the age of 55. She and her son continued to live in the big house that her husband had bought for them. Eventually, her son left home and went to California.

These days Violet passed many hours assessing various possibilities in regard to her age and her home. One idea she considered was selling her house and moving out to California. Her son was a successful American now with a beautiful wife, children and a modern home. Yet Violet wondered if he would have time for her. She didn’t want to impose on his freedom or his success. Besides that, she really did not like California’s climate. Her greatest wish was to keep the joy and satisfaction of her own house and garden with all the lovely plants for which she had cared over the years.

Violet’s mansion was in Shaker Heights, a suburb of Cleveland. How could she begin to describe this beautiful place? The three-story house had huge oak and pine trees in the front lawn. Beneath their graceful branches, she had planted so many purple, white and yellow crocus, daffodils, and red tulips, all for spring blooms. Once they were finished blooming, the perennials gave the house it’s summer blooms of big purple Bearded Iris, bright spotted orange Tiger Lilies, and award winning Tea Roses.

Her garden also displayed Brown-Eyed Susans, Marguerite Daisies, yellow French Marigolds, pink Petunias, white Yarrow and maroon and white Sweet William. During autumn the Mums bloomed orange, gold and burgundy. The big bright Zinnias of red and orange attracted butterflies.

With her own hands, she had planted her flowerbeds. The Garden Club had awarded her numerous times. She made her home and garden opened for public tours to see her gardening success. Her favorite accomplishment, so far, was the planting and care of red Trumpet Vines which attracted six humming birds. She liked to think the humming birds had traveled all the way from Central America to be with her. She didn't know what kind of humming birds they were, but she had pictures to prove it.

Violet loved to invite her American-Yugoslavian friends from her church to garden parties at her home in the summer. Her best friend and assistant supervisor, Marguerite, constantly pointed out the advantages to Violet of keeping the house and letting Marguerite move in with her. Violet was considering this possibility too, since Marguerite was so much like her sister, and Marguerite was also faced with economic changes in her retirement that were not favorable.

For a quick moment Violet gazed across the room to be sure that all the women were busy at their machines. Then she returned to her reverie.

There was one more incredible dream in her life. She wanted to create (and who knows, maybe it could bring in some money) a beautiful book on gardening. She had used her small camera to photograph and document the various techniques she had developed.

Again she glanced across the room at the data entry clerks who bent over the machines entering names, dates of illnesses, doctors in attendance and so on.

She picked up a note pad and began writing notes to herself. Chapter outline. Chapter One: Techniques I devised. Oh, yes, make a note, perhaps the Garden Club would help sponsor her book. They could sell it every year at the Spring Festival held at the Garden Center that was located near the Museum of Modern Art. What a place the Garden Center was! Violet sighed and gazed at the picture of herself and other Garden Center members on the corner of her desk. Life was good. Everything was going as it should, even at work. The workload would be reduced by that new employee.

The new employee was so friendly, kind and thoughtful. Violet liked her so much she decided to assign Ellen to a computer near Marguerite and put Marguerite in charge of Ellen. Violet could then begin work on her gardening book in that back empty office that she always wanted to make her own. Yes, the new employee would take a load of stress off their backs.

On Monday morning, the ring of a small wind-up alarm clock alerted Ellen Anderson, the new employee of the American Empire Insurance Company, to rise for her first day at her new job. She staggered from bed to silence the alarm.

Slowly, Ellen awoke to the anxiety and excitement of her first day. Opening the window blinds, she looked out at her neighborhood with its huge silent trees. Between them were the slate roofs of old Victorian houses with their "gingerbread" trim. Along the crumbling brick chimneys and rusty ladders of fire escapes, lavender-gray pigeons perched and cooed. The sun aimed a golden blade of light that pierced Ellen's attic apartment window.

Looking inward through her little apartment, which was nearly empty in regard to furniture, Ellen saw again the many pictures hanging on the central wall. She had shot them with her own camera, which stood on a tripod in the middle of the second of the two rooms. Ellen had been taking photography courses until her money for such things ran out. Tacked to the walls were pictures of pigeons in all aspects of pigeon life: in flight through snow, preening on sunny afternoons, bathing in evening rain storms and perched atop each other with the fluttering wings of love. Unfortunately, she still had not mastered the illusory qualities of light and

movement. She studied the pictures again, recalling the criticism of her instructors as she went to the second room.

In the second room, which functioned as a kitchen, more pictures were taped to cabinet doors, for in this room the natural shape of the attic followed the slant of the roof. One picture was of a pasture grown over with Ironweed and Golden Rod; another was of a red fox playing on an old gray haystack. There was the dramatic picture of a dead Great Horned Owl, its massive wings caught in a rusty barbed-wire fence of an abandoned farm. Above the kitchen sink were three small black and white pictures of Irish coal miners with their helmets cocked back, showing their faces streaked with coal dust. They stood before a mine shaft that had long ago been shut down. Another picture was of a father, mother and five children, all Native Americans dressed half in traditional garments and half in European clothes. Some of the features of these faces were in Ellen's own face, though her hair was light and so were her eyes.

On the wall next to the scuffed but sturdy kitchen table was Ellen's most treasured picture of all. It was a picture of her Uncle Everett who had taught her something that most working people did not know. He had learned it from his father, a railroad worker during the time of the great economic depression of the 1930's. He had taught her and made her pledge her life to his cause that would be her cause. She gazed thoughtfully at his picture, then she sat down to a breakfast of oatmeal and toast.

As she ate, she reflected on the job interview. The pay was terrible, but it was a paycheck until she could find a better job. Her unemployment benefits had expired and her small used car was in need of repairs. She worried about this until the glossy images in a photography magazine that was lying on the table drew her attention away. Then she looked up at her camera, wishing someday to make her living doing something artistic, but doubting that it would ever happen.

Pushing her bowl away she looked at the clock. It was getting late. She hurried to the closet that was so near empty it seemed someone had abandon the few clothes that hung there. Five polyester-rayon suits: gray, black, dark blue, brown and olive green. Ellen had learned to conform to the dress code that the bureaucrats of business required of their office servants. She chose her cheap black suit and quickly dressed.

Taking one last look at the warm, quiet rooms, Ellen said good-bye to her marginal freedom. She grabbed a bag of birdseed and threw a handful out the window to the pigeons. The fat round birds eagerly accepted the handout. Ellen then turned out the lights and locked the door behind her.

Outside was the desolation of November in the north. Her breath rose like a cloud from her mouth. The dry cold air stung her cheeks as she waited for the bus. Fortunately, it came quickly and Ellen climbed aboard.

As the bus rumbled along through the city streets, Ellen reflected back on her teenage years when she had learned from her Uncle Everett about how to organize workers and get better working conditions and benefits from the employer. After graduating from high school, she had joined her Uncle in the union's effort to organize workers in the plastics factory in their hometown. They were successful, but after five years, the plastics factory closed down and moved out of the country. With the loss of factory jobs, Ellen had been forced to find work as a data entry clerk. It was very much like factory work and Ellen believed she could use her experience as a union organizer to improve the conditions of the women workers. However, if she started a union organizing drive at her new job, she would not have her Uncle Everett to turn to for advice. He had passed away. If she took on such a project, she had only her memories to guide her.

Upon arriving at work, Ellen reported to her new supervisor's office. Violet greeted her cheerfully.

"If you are on time, industrious, and reasonable," said Violet, "You can go far in this company."

Ellen smiled as if she believed that.

"Follow me," said Violet, "I'll take you to your work station."

They walked across the room to a cluster of machines.

"This is Marguerite, she's my assistant."

The two women exchanged "Hellos."

"You can take over now, Marguerite," said Violet and she left.

"Now, here's what we do," Marguerite explained, showing Ellen stacks of papers that were divided into bundles. "Type this information in pink and yellow. Here are the codes. You'll be slow at first until you remember. We expect you to key to around 12,000 finger strokes an hour. But don't worry about it."

Ellen sat down and began to work. Just a year ago, when Ellen was last employed as an office worker, desks had "In" and "Out" baskets full of paper that clerks wrote on and passed along to other clerks. With the new technology, data entry departments were created where clerks sat entering the data from paper into machines.

"How do you like this machine. We get to sit near Violet," Marguerite said.

"Oh, it's fine," Ellen replied with cheerfulness. Ellen felt happy that Violet was not at her desk.

Through the windows lined with pink and purple African Violets, Ellen could see into another building with windows lined with plants. Through the windows of that building, she could see hundreds of office workers sitting at desks, machines and phones. The different floors were like trays of plants in a greenhouse stacked in levels with florescent lights blazing as the only daylight the office workers knew.

When the break time was announced, Ellen was ready to move and stretch her body. She had sat for three hours in the same position. Marguerite showed her the employee lounge. Some women sprawled on the sofas and began snoring deeply. One woman went to the phone. Ellen stood and started stretching her arms and shoulders. Other women entered and began playing cards.

"Deal! Give me some good cards!" said one as she sat at a round table in the middle of the room. The others leaned across the table with cards in their hands.

"You remember that pay check we got last Friday?"

"Vaguely."

"Yeah, right, mine's gone already. I didn't do nothing with it. It just disappeared."

"That's called paying bills."

"Play, it's your turn."

"Where do you think you work anyway?"

"Well, I know, but they could pay a wage you could live on."

"It's a salary, remember, a salary."

"That's crazy," said the last, she kicked her high-heels off and adjusted her bra strap.

"You girls see my new make-up?" called another as she came through the door. "I'm selling this now. Just put in your orders and pay me on payday."

"Great! You can make some money off us," one woman snarled.

"We ought to bet money on this game," another suggested.

“Good idea since you’re winning.”

At the phone, located in the far corner, a woman began screaming.

“I saw you looking at that other girl last night. I know what you’re thinking, I’m not good enough now. Pig!” She slammed the phone down and ran to the restroom with tears in her eyes.

“Break time’s over,” one of the card players yelled, and everyone returned to their workstations.

Returning also, Ellen wondered if she could adjust to working again after so many weeks of being unemployed. Her body was beginning to ache. She had forgotten how dull entering data into a computer was. She thought about the women she had seen in the lounge and now noticed where they sat in the data entry room. How odd it seemed that so many strangers were brought together and worked so diligently, day after day, and were so productive, in spite of their complaints about low pay.

The American Empire Insurance Company used the data they entered to determine whether or not to pay the medical bills of injured or sick people. If the injury was not covered by the policy, the claim was rejected and medical bills would become the sick persons unpaid debt. The clerks inputting the data were as accurate as they could be, not due to concern for the clients, but in fear of losing the job. Most of the clerks were ignorant of the huge profits accumulated from their work. Nor were the clerks aware to whom these profits went. Ellen understood that the insurance industry was based on the odds that many people would pay a premium for imagined protection, but few would suffer enough to collect. Consequently, money accumulated daily, weekly, yearly, making this a lucrative business for those at the top of the company.

“New Girl, you should not be staring around so much. It will slow your production and in this business, you must be productive,” Marguerite admonished.

Later Marguerite came to Ellen again. “I have news for you, New Girl. Management has decided to place you downstairs on the third floor.”

Ellen was shocked. She had been hired to a position on the seventh floor. Her decision to take the job was partly based on the environment she thought she would be working in. She knew she shouldn’t become so personally attached to her job conditions, but she did like the pretty flowers along the windows, the hour of sunlight and the openness of the room. Now, she had no idea where they were going to put her. She felt as if she were a piece of furniture about to be moved. She had no voice in the matter, except that she could simply quit. Her need for money would not allow for quitting and her desire to prove herself was even stronger.

“Marguerite, I thought they hired me because you needed someone on the seventh floor. Why are they doing this?”

“It is very disappointing for me, too. I can’t work as hard as I did when I was younger. But when the management says to do something, we have to do it,” said Marguerite. “Follow me, I will introduce you to the third floor employees.”

They walked the length of the floor and entered the elevator. Once they left the elevator they strolled through dim hallways past tiny office cubicles that barricaded both space and light. Into one of these cubicles they turned and stopped.

“This is the Claims Entry Department,” Marguerite explained. “This is Mindy, Odette, Vicky and Carol. They will be your new workers.” The employees looked up at Ellen. Carol jumped up out of her seat and came to shake Ellen’s hand.

“We could sure use more help down here. We have deadlines we must meet,” Carol said. She looked distraught with her hair flying loose. “Here, sit down at this machine.” She pointed to one of the machines with her hand. Ellen did as she was told.

“Now you will answer to Carol Kline. Carol answers to Violet,” said Marguerite. “I will leave you here, I’m sure you will do well.”

Ellen looked around at the dismal walls and cramped conditions. Her co-workers glanced at her and returned their eyes to their work. With a deadline hanging over them, they dared not delay production.

Carol stood next to Ellen and explained the work they did and how to do it. Carol was a middle-aged woman with a big belly, short white hair and a dull gray complexion. She explained to Ellen that she had been with American Empire for nearly two decades and she knew everything there was to know about the company. Her responsibility was to train the workers in her department and keep tabs of their production.

“If you have any questions, let me know,” Carol stated then she sat at a machine facing the women and watched every move they made.

“By the way, when do we go to lunch?” Ellen asked. She hated to ask, but was beginning to feel weak. Carol had a disappointed look on her face. She seemed to wish employees didn’t think so much of themselves and thought more of their work.

“Oh well.” Carol sighed with disgust, “Odette, when do you go to lunch?”

“Same time as Vicky, at noon, Carol. You know that. Now, please don’t give us any problems.” Odette was a tall thin African-American woman whose posture indicated to Ellen an attempt to hold on to the little advantage she and Vicky had, while hoping to still appear friendly to the new employee. Ellen smiled at her sympathetically.

“We’re so busy around here it’s a wonder Carol let’s us go to lunch,” came a voice from the other side of the room.

“No talking, Mindy, get to work.” Carol warned.

Ellen turned to see Mindy’s powder-soft white smiling face and long yellow-blonde hair. Her blue eyes were decorated with blue eye make-up and looked at Ellen with mischief and rebellion.

“Ellen, you can go to lunch the same time as Mindy.” Carol said.

When noon came, Vicky and Odette, picked up their purses and bid everyone good-bye. When they returned after their lunch hour, Mindy came to Ellen’s desk.

“I’ll show you the way to the cafeteria,” Mindy said. She looked Ellen over with the delighted expression of finding a new friend. “You and I can lunch together everyday.”

Ellen hesitated. She didn’t know if this would be something she would regret, but, for the moment, she went along with Mindy, appreciating the friendliness.

On the second floor, the company provided a nice large cafeteria.

“It’s subsidized by the company so the prices aren’t as high as the restaurants outside. If it weren’t for this cafeteria, I would have to bring my lunch from home,” Mindy explained. They went through the line gathering from a variety of desserts, salads and entrees.

“How do you like the work so far?” Mindy asked as they seated themselves at a table.

Ellen worried what to say. Even an innocent conversation could be the basis of censorship and denial at any job where workers were in competition to keep their positions and their paychecks.

“It’s Ok,” she replied indifferently.

“It’s a paycheck,” Mindy responded.

Ellen smiled and added, “I asked for more money, but they said ‘Take it or leave it.’”

“And so like the rest of us, you took it. Everyone here hates the work and the low pay. I guess we stay for the other small favors.”

“This is a really nice cafeteria.”

“So it is,” Mindy sighed.

They exchanged personal information. Both were unmarried, childless and in their late twenties. They recited to each other all the companies they had worked at and why they left. It was very much the same for both of them. Always seeking a better place and never finding it. Then Mindy gave Ellen words of caution.

“Listen to me, I know what I’m talking about. You can’t trust Carol. She’ll be friendly and helpful, but she’s a snake in the grass and watch out for the Black women too, they stick together!”

Ellen puzzled over these comments. She wondered if Mindy’s attitude could create a problem for her in relating to her fellow co-workers. She thought it might be wise to have lunch with someone else. An innocent few hours at the place and Ellen was already being nudged to take sides in some constant but undefined battle.

“I don’t want to get caught up in office politics,” Ellen said. “But what’s wrong with Black women sticking together?”

Mindy’s keen mind and quick eyes showed recognition of a possible error.

“I didn’t mean anything bad against Black people,” she protested, “But you do have to watch out for Carol. Odette and Vickie are nice Afros, but they side with Carol every time. I’m just trying to warn you.”

It wasn’t until late afternoon that Ellen heard Carol’s side of the story.

“When you’ve finished with your work, put this label on it. Oh good, Mindy’s gone on break. You have to watch out for her. She can’t be trusted. She’s a complainer. I try to make it nice here for the girls, but she ruins everything.”

By the end of the day, Ellen was very tired of the conflict. She was also still angry at how the company had moved her to a new department. Only the desperate would go back to that mess, she thought, and she was desperate. To look for another job was impossible in the present economy. She was lucky to have gotten this one.

Ellen drew hope from her knowledge that a company that was so abusive was a perfect opportunity. So for now, she knew she was in the right place.

As she made her way home from the bus stop, walking down a wintry, ice-covered sidewalk, she thought about the work situation. Each day on the job would be like a journey on this ice-covered sidewalk. Ellen knew she had to carefully place each foot, choose each word and action so as not to lose her chance. It was important not to fall. She must stay employed and she must carry on with her pledge to make changes.