

J for Job

16 years old. Our working lives just beginning. Three of us, Diane, Marilyn and me have been sent to the Salt Mines, the God-forsaken outpost of Gorton Library. There was a large staff for a small branch library but we also had to work on the two 'travelling libraries' and the static caravan library in Openshaw. Izzy Walton was the man in charge of, or totally out of his depth, managing a totally female staff. Miss Heywood, in early middle age, was his deputy. Isador Walton, to give him his full moniker, was the spitting image of Alexandre Dumas, as pictured in the frontispiece of "The Three Musketeers". He, Mr Walton, not Dumas, had the revolting habit of sucking a whole orange every day for his lunch. He would slice off the top and suck loudly on the juicy inside.

Sheena was the same age as me. I was asked to help Sheena file some catalogue cards. She had several wooden catalogue drawers laid on the desk in front of her. She handed over one of the drawers so that I could begin filing. A long metal rod ran through a hole in the bottom of each card, to stop the contents falling out when the drawer was handled. Sheena took great delight in watching my attempts to remove the rod so I could start filing. I had to threaten to return to the librarian's office to ask, thereby getting Sheena into trouble, before she relented and showed me how to wiggle a small catch beneath the drawer to allow the rod to be withdrawn.

Mrs Street ran the caravan library at Openshaw along military lines. Her bark was worse than her bite but the great unwashed who seem to migrate to libraries, definitely felt her bark AND her bite. She would very pointedly emerge from behind the desk with a Flit Gun, a contraption that looked like a large bicycle pump. It contained a powerfully smelling disinfectant which she proceeded to spray around the hapless person who had not taken care of their personal hygiene.

Mrs Doherty was in her 60s when I began work at Gorton Library, a thin bespectacled person of a nervous disposition. She was not up to coping with the wild ones of Gorton and was frequently off sick with "nervous debility", an illness I had never before come across.

Marlene was a sophisticated 18 year old with black rimmed eyes, pale lipstick and a deep black fringe. Those of us on evening duty at the library one evening were very excited when an exotic young man, with shoulder length hair which curled around the bottom, came to meet Marlene. Next day we all demanded to know more about her 'date'. He was called Dave Davies and was in a band called "The Kinks".

I worked for six months at Gorton Library, scheduled some days to go out on the 'travelling library'. This involved sitting in the cab with the driver (usually called Ray or Tom, or a similar three letter word). The library was in a trailer which was towed to its stop for that day. The cab was unhooked, the trailer was connected to a power source and there you were, left alone for the day in the wilds of Newton Heath or Ancoats. Some of the stops were in the middle of empty acres where houses had once been, since demolished, and nothing yet built in their place. Your only customers might be some traveller kids whose family caravans were parked on the wasteland of east Manchester. One evening in Ancoats I was alone on the trailer, reading a novel and willing the clock to move to eight o'clock when I could leave for my bus. I hadn't had any customers since a few after-school mums and kids. Suddenly there was someone climbing the steps and two very beefy men were standing in front of the desk. A huge Alsatian at the end of a rivet studded leash was slobbering all over the counter flap.

“Dogs aren’t allowed in the library” I whispered, cowering back as far as possible. I didn’t know who to be most afraid of....the men or the dog.

One of them made a grab for the date stamp and, seizing my arm, stamped the date all the way up my arm. Then the men jumped off the trailer and I could hear them laughing as they went off down the road. I locked the door and, picking up my bag and coat, I ran down the road for the early bus, reckoning I had a good excuse for closing half an hour early!
