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How I Spent My Summer (1967)

BY ERICA WOLFE BURKE

[*Author's Note:* Some names of individuals have been changed or omitted, for the usual reasons.]

How I Got There

I graduated from college in New York City in January 1967. I planned on attending acting school in the fall, but in the meantime I needed a job. The head of the drama department recommended that I apply for a job at a small theatrical costume business, which I got. I made \$53 a week after taxes. When that job disappeared in May (they lost their big summer contract, which was with the Lake George Opera), I worked for two weeks running the Baby-sitting Bureau in the placement office at my college. I moved on from that when a student came fuming into the placement office, declaring she couldn't stand it, and she had quit the job she had gotten through the office. She had been modeling fur coats in the garment district. The old guy was a dirty old man and—and—and ... They asked her, at the fur coat company, why she was leaving. Did she not like the work? Oh no, she said, the work was fine, but she wanted a job in her field. And what was her field? Organic chemistry.

So I took her job—and I think she took mine, at least temporarily.

I'm a Model

So now I had a job as a showroom model. I had to wear a black dress, heels,

makeup, and my hair put up. Quite a change from jeans and sweatshirts. I took the subway from 116th Street to 34th Street and walked to the Brooklyn & New York Fur Manufacturers on 29th Street. When a buyer came—say from a department store in St. Louis or Des Moines—I would slip into a fur coat and walk across the show room, turn, pause, hold the coat open, then closed, and then leave the room. Unless the buyer had a question or wanted to look some more, I would not speak except to say the model number. This was written on a tag, which dangled from the sleeve when the coat was on a hanger, but was secreted in my hand while I modeled the coat.

This was not as glamorous as it might sound. In the first place, it was June, and it was very, very hot that year. The showroom was air conditioned down to a reasonable shirt-sleeve temperature, but *still*. Also, Brooklyn & New York was not a top-drawer establishment then. They made “fun” furs—mostly dyed blue or green or something else fun and bright. Remember this was the summer of '67. But mostly, there weren't any customers. I think there were maybe four customers in the six weeks I had that job, which, by the way, paid \$65 a week *before* taxes. My predecessor was right, too, about Mr. Stein being a dirty old man. He was fitting a coat on me one day and copping a feel of my breasts and said I shouldn't mind, because he was just an old man, and no harm was done.

Not glamorous to be sure, but I remember the job as both intensely interesting and intensely boring. The boring part was spending the morning sitting in the office by myself, playing solitaire and keeping track of how often I won. I played 50 games a day, and I don't remember how many I won—maybe every 33rd game. After lunch, Shirley, the bookkeeper, came in. She was a tall woman with acne scars and brown frizzy hair. She listened to talk radio all afternoon, and it nearly drove me nuts. Monday through Thursday afternoons, she worked on the books. On Friday, she did the payroll. After she wrote out all the paychecks, she figured out exactly what bills and what quarters, dimes, nickels, and pennies she needed to cash all the paychecks. She went to the bank and got the cash. At 2:30 in the afternoon, the men (and the two women workers) lined up outside the window to the office. Shirley handed each one his or her check. The employee signed it and handed it back, and she handed out an envelope with the right amount of money. I took my check home and put it in the bank.

I always brought my lunch. At lunchtime, I'd go back in the workroom and sit around a cutting table with the furriers. It was some time before I realized that this might be a breach of etiquette—that, maybe, I wasn't supposed to fraternize with the (highly skilled) labor, plus maybe, I wasn't supposed to sit with the men.



Erica, 1967. Photo by Peter Reich.

The two women who worked there didn't work on fur. They did linings and pockets and buttons and buttonholes. They sat in their own corner of the room; and they ate their lunch there, too. I *think* they spoke English, but I don't remember that they ever spoke to me.

There were four or five men in the workshop: the foreman, maybe three furriers, and someone whose job it was to sweep up and run errands. I think they were all in their fifties—gray hair, maybe a receding hairline. They had all grown up on the Lower East Side, when it was a Jewish world. They knew the Yiddish theater and the Broadway theater. I think they'd seen

every musical on Broadway in the past 30 years, and most of the straight plays, too. All the men thought it was wonderful that I wanted to be an actress—they were huge theater fans, and they thought it was a terrific business to go into—and they all knew people who had gone into it. I think that was the year that Herschel Bernardi replaced Zero Mostel in *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*. Herschel had dated Sammy's sister in high school. This was a revelation to me: first of all that there still was a working class audience for theater, and secondly, that these guys didn't think I was a hopeless romantic nut case for thinking I could act.

Furs of the Rich and Famous

Brooklyn & New York was not, as I said, a really classy outfit—but it did have some classy connections. They did contract work for patrons of Jacques Kaplan, a very fancy furrier on 57th Street. An old established firm, Kaplan had branched out into “fun fashion” furs in the 1960s. While I was there, Brooklyn & New York made a black and white pony-skin jacket for a customer of Kaplan (i.e., B & NY did the work, and then they put a “Jacques Kaplan” label in it). The customer was an art collector and heiress, with houses in Paris, New York, and elsewhere. I wouldn't have known who she was, except a college friend of mine was also a friend of the heiress's daughter “Pip” and had been living at their New York apartment during the school year that had just ended. My friend threw a cast party there, which I went to. The only thing I remember of the apartment was a small Paul Klee painting on the stair landing.

My other brush with the very rich and famous came about because Brooklyn & New York was the New York workshop for Birgir Christensen (BC) in Copenhagen.¹ Mr. Stein came originally from Berlin. He had fled to the United States; his brother, also a furrier, had found refuge in Denmark and now worked for Birgir Christensen. And the connection was made. Mrs. Moore-McCormack (that is to say, she was either Mrs. Moore or Mrs. McCormack—of Moore-McCormack shipping lines) had ordered a mink jacket at Birger Christensen in their brand new color “Arctic Pearl.” When it was finished and she got it (in the mail?), it didn't fit quite right. It needed to be let out a little across the bust. Well, that meant, of course, inserting additional fur. There *was* no “Arctic Pearl” mink in America, because Birgir Christensen had just invented the color. BC had a business representative in New York City, a slim young blonde Dane, who brought over a pelt dyed “Arctic Pearl,” which had been shipped (mailed?) to him from the home office. Mrs. M. came in for a fitting. She was a pretty blonde woman, maybe in her early

forties, with a pleasant informal manner. She wore a red-and-white, checked cotton suit and white cotton gloves. When she took off her gloves, I got a sight of *the* largest diamond I have ever seen. It was a rectangle that seemed to cover her finger from knuckle to knuckle. Hooeeree!!!

One of the things about working in the fur district is that it was a *district*. Every floor of every building was a fur manufacturer. You look out your windows and you look into their windows. And the only women I saw were sitting in the corner sewing fabric, while the men sat in the middle of the room sewing fur. I watched through a window across the street and a floor or two down at a man doing something that looked very odd. He had a small animal skin and he was slicing it lengthwise every inch or so. Then he started making small slits that went sort of sideways, something like this //////////////// and then on the other side of the long slit, creating a herringbone pattern. I asked someone, and it was explained. He was working on mink. Minks have long silky hair and thin fragile skin. So the furrier preparing a mink skin cuts it all up, and then somebody else sews it back together. This has the double advantage of making the hair denser and making the skin stronger. No wonder mink garments cost a fortune! The name for this process, by the way, is “letting out.” Well, every occupation has its own jargon.

All Good Things Must Come to an End

I mentioned that we didn’t have very many customers. So on a Monday in mid-July, Seymour, Mr. Stein’s partner, said he had to let me go. As few customers as they had, Shirley, the bookkeeper, could model the coats. He said I should take as much time as I needed during the week to look for another job. And tell them I was making \$85 a week, and he’d back me up.

Well, I did a little of that (job hunting) with no success at all. But what was probably more important was that I spent most of the week in the workroom, learning to nail furs. When I told the guys I would be

leaving, the foreman invited me to spend the week learning. I still went to work in my little black dress and heels, but I didn’t hang out in the office any more.

Here’s how it works. The furs come in flat and stiff. They get put in a tumbler to soften them up. The patterns for the coat pieces are drawn on brown paper stapled to a 4’ x 8’ table top. The pelts are then dampened and stretched to fit the pattern pieces. They are not cut the way you would cut fabric. It takes five pelts of hair seal or otter (the furs we used) to make a coat—this is a “60s length” coat, maybe 36” long. Not a jacket, but certainly not a “full length” fur coat. One pelt makes the back of the coat, one each for the two fronts, and one each for the sleeves. The first skilled hand-done job is nailing the pelt, fur side down, onto the pattern. You pull and stretch and tap in a nail to hold it in place, and then pull and stretch some more. In the end, you have placed nails every half an inch all the way around the skin. Each nail is bent over to the outside to help it hold its place. You develop a rhythm: tap tap bend tap, tap tap bend tap. I also learned how to cut without damaging the hair, and how to sew on a fur machine. At the end of the week the foreman said, sadly, that if it weren’t for the slump in the industry (the same slump that cost me my modeling job), he’d hire me to nail. I don’t know whether he really would have, because I didn’t see *any* women working at nailing.

(As a side note, my mother, who is a lefty intellectual college professor, thought it would be great if I could get a job nailing furs because, she said, the furriers had a really good union.)

So I said goodbye and went on to other things.

The Rest of My Summer

1. My mother hired me to make a slipcover for her couch.

2. I was a salesperson in a hip little boutique (1967, remember?).

3. I did a week’s work for a former employer, a professor at the Columbia School of Social Work, coloring maps for a study

he was finishing, paid for by a grant from the American Geographical Society (AGS).

4. On Friday of that week, he got a call from the AGS saying, “Who is it that we’re paying to work for you, and can she come and work here?” So I started there on Monday.

I found an apartment to share with my college friend, who had been living at the rich art collector’s New York apartment, and we moved in together, and I started acting school, and she started her junior year of college.

Now I’m an archivist and Special Collections Librarian. You could tell it was going to end that way, couldn’t you? ▼

Note

’Birgir Christensen, starting as a small fur business in 1869, is today “a highly revered brand ... where some of the world’s most elegant and exclusive furs are made.” From BC website, www.birger-christensen.com/en/about-us/history/.



Erica grew up in New York City. She graduated from Barnard College and has a MLIS from SUNY Albany. She is the Archivist and Special Collections Librarian in the Folklife Center at Crandall Public Library in Glens Falls, NY. Along the way, she has had a variety of odd and interesting jobs. She lives in Hartford, New York, in a 1795 farmhouse with her family and one dog, three cats, and 15 chickens (see prophetic accompanying photo). Photo by Gladys Meyer Wolfe.

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