

[Yes, Thank You]

Mari Thomasi Recorded Writers' Section Files

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YES, THANK YOU

The telephone operators' lounging room, in the second story of a main Street business block, was dim and [cool?]. Judy Cleary said, "This wicker furniture is cozy; isn't it? Pal and I are working the same trick this week, 7-11, 12-4. This is our relief period."

Palmira Fernandes lay prone on the davenport. She was a pretty girl. Her oral, vivacious face shone with a healthy pallor. Judy said, "You must have had a date last nights, Pal. If you aren't lapping up a chocolate milk across the street during relief, it means a date last night."

"Date!" Pal spoke bitterly. "Bill couldn't get the car last night, his father was going to some meeting. We had to go to the movies and then home. You can't just park in some booth half the night without ordering anything. Bill gets paid on Saturday. We were both broke so we went home. Johnny -my brother- had his gang on the porch; my mother was holding down the living room until Dad got back; my sister and Lucy Cane were trying out dance steps in the kitchen. I went to bed as soon as I got home. Bill's sick of supervision. I don't blame him. It's different when he has the car. Even if there's no gas we can sit and talk and listen to the radio. Anyway it's privacy."

"You're better off than Evelyn Drandelli," Judy commented. "I was coming downstreet last night 'round eight. I saw her meet Joe on the corner. Has to every time. He's never been to her house. They're sore 'cause he's not Italian."

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“My folks like Bill well enough,” Pal said. “It’s just that they believe in that eternal chaperoning. They were brought up that way in Spain. You’d think the two of us got so much nature we couldn’t be left along a 2 minute without starting a family. When they don’t care for someone they let you know. Last year while I was going with Pete my father swore the kitchen blue. Told ne not to get serious over a stonecutter, though he’s one himself and always has been. He meant well. I mean my father. He’s had a brother and an uncle died from doing that kind of work. He doesn’t want me to see any more of that.

“I keep telling my father that Bill will get a good job one of these days. He’s been out of High School only two years. And jobs are scarce in Barre, unless / you want to go in the sheds or quarries. He had a chance for a clerking job in Claremont, New Hampshire, but his people wanted him to stay home. He works three days a week at MacDover’s filling station. MacDover used to be a stonecutter. He worked with my father. When his son finished High School — he was in Bill’s class — he left the sheds and bought out a small filling station. He and his son run it together. Bill’s father operates a derrick and does machine cleaning at the quarries. He lost two fingers of his left hand the day Bill was born. Someone came to tell him the news; he got so excited his hands went careless with the machine, and off went two fingers. Snipped off clean. Bill’s mother is Scotch. She’s a cousin of Bill’s boss. MacDover. Whenever Bill’s at our house I try to keep the conversation away from religion. My mother is Roman Catholic to the bone, and she knows his mother in just as strong a Scotch woman.

“There’s a whole clan of us Fernandes in town. All from Santander, Spain. I’ve never been there. My folks came over twenty-nine years ago. A baby brother of mine — their first baby — crossed half way with them. An epidemic broke out an board. Some fever. My brother died when they 3 were five day / out. My mother made my father go to the kitchen and ask the cook for a bottle, and she made him fill it with ocean water. It was all she could ever see of the baby’s grave, she said. It’s still in her dresser drawer at home. She takes it out on All Souls’ Day and Memorial Day, and sets a bouquet before it.

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“We've always lived in the same house on Berton Street. I was born there. My two brothers and two sisters were born there, too. My mother can't see a hospital unless it's for an operation. Berton Street isn't an ideal residential section. None of the houses have more than two feet of front lawn, and they're close together. But it's near the shed where my father works. At first they rented the house, now they own it. There are about a dozen sheds close by; when they're all going they make an awful racket. Washdays my mother has taken to hanging her laundry in the attic. She insists that the stone dust from the sheds sticks to the wet clothes.

“My sister Rosina is two years older than I am. She's entered the convent in Burlington. Next year she takes the black veil. I miss her. We see her only one Sunday a month.

“I wanted to teach, and look where I am! I started working here right after graduation, and planned to work only for the summer. It seemed so good to be earning my own money that I decided to stay the year. Then I stuck. It's not a bad job. It was complicated at first, hard to get used to the switchboard. You got darn sick of saying 'Number, please,' and 'Yes, thank you' all the time. At first it was just 'Thank you.' Now it's 'Yes, thank you.' You got so used to those words they're apt to roll out of your mouth anytime. I was shopping in the dime store the other day, 4 and when the clerk handed me my change I said, 'Yes, thank you.'

“I'm a telephone operator but my mother has never got used to a phone. There's only one number she'll call and that's my aunt's. If she needs groceries she'll go downtown herself and get them, or she'll wait until one of us is home to phone the order. She doesn't speak much English. She's afraid of being misunderstood over the phone. She isn't the only one. You'll find plenty of foreign born old people in town who hate to use a phone.”

Judy laughed. “My mother is just the opposite. She calls up Mrs. Carty on Elm Street and they talk for an hour at a time. She and my mother were girlhood chums in Ireland. They have to tell each other every bit of news. She was brides-maid for my mother in Ireland.

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My father died the second year they were in this country, two months after I was born. My mother got a job doing house work. She wrote letters to Abbie— she wasn't Mrs. Carty then— and within two months Abbie left Ireland and came over here to live with us. For three years, my mother says. Then she married Dan Carty and made a new home for herself. But they're just as good friends as they were in the old days. If they aren't talking to each other over the phone, they're talking to each other across a table in our apartment, or in Mrs. Carty's house.”

Pal's smooth brow creased into a frown. “It's a job to get my mother to go out of the house except for her shopping. She won't go to the movies. She's been twice in all the years she's lived in Barre. But she heard my brothers talking about that new Chaplin movie, the one where Jack Oakie takes the part of Mussolini, and she surprised us by saying she'd like to see it. She has relatives — Spanish ones — who live near Mussolini's 5 summer home. Occasionally some friends of my mother will drop in for the evening. They talk and crochet. And once a month faithfully she goes to Women's Night at the Spanish Club. Except for that and for Sunday Mass, she's content to stay home and sew.”