

The Memoirs
of
Beatrice Miller

by

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Chapter One

Beatrice Miller fell somewhere in the middle of eight children. Of all the Miller children, Beatrice was organized, punctual, and a true sales person. She was willing to sell anything for a price. Her lunches were far more than she could ever eat; selling it ala cart gave her a nice little profit.

From the time she could walk, playing store was Beatrice's favorite game. She would collect items for around the house, set them up on display, and invite her siblings to shop. When she was a little older, Mother caught her sneaking out of the house with a small box. When asked what was in it, she simply replied, "Stuff." It wasn't until a few days later that Mother was informed by a neighbor; Beatrice was going door to door selling her goods. After that, Beatrice Miller was only allowed to set up shop in her bedroom, which she did daily.

The Miller's lived in Greenville, a small Midwest town that did not offer much in the way of shopping.

Greenville's Main Street was no more than two blocks long. The biggest shop in those two blocks was Uncle Walter's Mercantile. Reis Mercantile had been around as long as the town had. Beatrice's Grandfather had started it shortly after he and Grandma Myrtle came to town. Uncle Walter started working when he was a teenager and never left. When Grandpa Reis passed on, Uncle Walter was the obvious choice to take over. Beatrice loved the Mercantile; she went whenever Mother allowed her to.

Uncle Walter offered positions to all his nieces and nephews when they became of working age. Beatrice couldn't wait for her twelfth birthday. She had spent her lifetime managing the store she had created in her bedroom and after years in business, it was time to close her doors and move on. She was certain she would be ready for real customers, real merchandise, and real money.

Beatrice's older siblings had done their stint in the Mercantile, and although each was grateful for the opportunity, none of them wanted to make it their life. Beatrice could not understand such a choice. For her, there was no other place she wanted to be than in a store. As her twelfth birthday drew close, her anticipation grew.

Mother was known for her parties and Beatrice's twelfth birthday party did not disappoint. Aunt Ruth came on the train for the celebration. Aunt Ruth lived

in the big city and Beatrice thought her life was most likely the most exciting one she could imagine. Ruth stayed all weekend assisting Mother with preparations and spending time with Uncle Walter whenever she could sneak away.

The night before her first day, Beatrice Miller finished dinner, said goodnight to Mother and Father, kissed the little ones and retired to her room. She placed her handmade Do Not Disturb sign on the door. She had much to do to prepare for the next day and could not be bothered. Beatrice laid out her new dress that Father bought her just for this very occasion. He had asked Aunt Ruth to pick out a dress she thought that Beatrice would like and bring it with her to the birthday party. When Beatrice opened it, she couldn't believe how beautiful it was. She knew immediately that it would be what she wore on her first day of work. Beatrice shined her Sunday church shoes and set them next to her bed. She brushed her hair and pulled it up into a pony tail. Beatrice changed into her night gown, got under the covers, and laid there for hours waiting for the sun to rise.

The next morning, as Mother entered the kitchen to start the day, she found Beatrice dressed and sitting at the window. "Beatrice, how long have you been down here?"

"A little while, Father said he needed to do something in the barn before breakfast, but he'll be back," she said.

“You were up before Father?”

“Yes,” she said with confidence.

“Bea, you’re going to be very tired today. You need to get your sleep.”

“I just couldn’t Mother. I’ll make up for it tonight.”

Mother began making breakfast as each of the children made their way downstairs. Father returned with a jug of fresh milk and a basket of eggs. The kitchen came alive, but Beatrice did not notice. Her eyes were set on the clock, watching each minute tick by.

At the appropriate time, Beatrice put on her coat, picked up the lunch Mother prepared for her. She gave Mother a kiss and as she turned to do the same to Father, realized he was standing by the door with keys in his hand.

“On your first day, you will be escorted to work,” Father said with a grin.

“Really?” Beatrice said. She had never known Father to offer to escort anyone anywhere. He believed that if you were old enough to have somewhere to go, you were certainly old enough to figure out how to get there.

Beatrice followed Father to the truck with a chorus of young voices wishing her well on her first day. The short drive was done in silence for Beatrice’s

anticipation stole any conversation from her. As Father pulled in front of the Mercantile, he said, "You're early, Uncle Walter will appreciate that."

"Yes, sir," Beatrice said with a smile and nod. She grabbed the door handle, looked back at Father who sent her off with a wink and she opened the door.

She had planned to be ten minutes early, but with Father offering to drive her, she was even earlier. She had overheard Uncle Walter confess that he would not tolerate tardiness and that was why Cousin Fred was let go. She would not be like Cousin Fred. She wasn't sure what *let go* meant, but it would never be a term used in conjunction with her name. If there was any *letting go* to do, she would be the one - letting go. Beatrice waited on the front porch until the appropriate time. Ten minutes, not one earlier or later.

Uncle Walter welcomed her with a handshake as, according to him, hugging was not proper in the business world. Proper employees greeted each other with a strong, bold handshake. It was the professional way of doing things. Beatrice had been practicing her handshake for some time now. There were many of the boys at school that stayed clear of her in recent days as their hands could take no more of Beatrice's professional greeting.

Uncle Walter showed her to the back hall where she had her very own hook to hang her coat and shelf for

any personal belongings. Beatrice placed her lunch on the shelf. As far as hooks and shelves went, these were acceptable. Beatrice decided right then that when she had a shop of her own, her hooks and shelves would have far more personality.

On her first day, Beatrice Miller was assigned to the fabric bins. Beatrice's mother was an accomplished seamstress and Uncle Walter thought that starting with something familiar would make Beatrice's first day much more enjoyable. Beatrice took the assignment with her usual smile and nod. Truth be told, she hated fabric. She had held, measured, and folded so much fabric in her life that she would like to never see another bolt. Beatrice had seen pictures of dresses that did not require mothers to sew. They were already made; those were the dresses she wanted to sell. Not stuffy old fabric that had to be turned into something. She wanted the finished product.

Beatrice kept busy all day. She folded, dusted, reorganized, talked to customers, and swept the floor. Uncle Walter watched in delight, Beatrice was a natural. As the last customer left the store, Uncle Walter asked Beatrice to lock the door behind them. As Beatrice turned the knob, she knew she was home. This is where she would spend the rest of her life. She would work hard, and someday she would be the shop keeper.

Uncle Walter accompanied her to the back hall where she collected her coat from the hook and her belongings

from the shelf. As she turned, Uncle Walter held out his hand and Beatrice shook it.

“Quite a grip you have there,” Uncle Walter said.

“Yes sir, I’ve been practicing,” Beatrice replied.

“Good day today, my dear. A good day indeed. Will you be back tomorrow?” he asked.

“Yes sir,” Beatrice said confidently. “Tomorrow - and every day after that.”

“Good!” said Uncle Walter. “Just a few more days working with fabric and then on to dry goods.” Beatrice loosed her grip. “Something wrong?” he asked.

“No sir, I look forward to it,” she said quite convincingly.

They walked to the front door and as Uncle Walter unlatched the lock, Beatrice sighed. *A few more days with those awful bolts of fabrics*, she thought. As she passed through the door and heard the lock latch once again, she turned, smiled and waved causing her to trip on the first step off the porch. Beatrice caught herself and continued on. With each step she noticed the ache that began running up her shins, it seemed to be traveling up from her feet. *These damn shoes*, she thought. Beatrice Miller had never used that word before. She had only ever heard one person say that word. Father used it frequently when he was angry or frustrated. It sounded bold when Father said it. It sounded bold when Beatrice

said it, even if she hadn't spoken it out loud. It felt like a useful word. *I don't care what Mother says, I'm wearing my boots tomorrow. This will be the last day my feet will hurt.*

As the days and weeks passed, Beatrice Miller showed up to work ten minutes early, stylishly dressed from head to ankle. She learned about dry goods, hardware, and every other product Uncle Walter sold. On her sixth month anniversary, Uncle Walter greeted her energetically at the door.

"Good morning, my dear!" he said as he held out his hand. Beatrice grasped it and shook it firmly. "Still a great grip you have there." Beatrice smiled. "Today, you are graduating to the cash register."

Beatrice began shaking Uncle Walter's hand vigorously. "Oh, thank you! Thank you!" she said.

Beatrice walked to the back hall, hung her coat on the hook and placed her belongings on the shelf. As she turned, Uncle Walter held out his hand, in it was a shiny gold pin.

"This is for you," he said. "It is to commemorate your accomplishments on the selling floor and shows that you are now ready to move up in the world." Beatrice raised her head in honor as Uncle Walter pinned it to her collar.

"I will wear it always," she said. Uncle Walter stretched out his arms as if he was expecting a hug, but Beatrice

would have nothing of it. She confidently held out her hand. Uncle Walter hesitated for just a moment, then laughed and shook her hand joyously.

“Are you ready to get started?” he asked.

“Yes sir,” she replied.

The two walked over to the register. Beatrice thought it to be the most beautiful thing she had ever seen. She had heard stories of pirates and treasure chests and could not imagine that any treasure ever found could be more beautiful as Uncle Walter’s cash register.

She had admired it, well, forever; ever since she could remember visiting Uncle Walter’s store with her mother. Its brass finished looked like gold to Beatrice and no one could convince her otherwise. She loved the picture of the hand that pointed to two numbers; one being the clerk number and the other the sale price. She would have a clerk number someday; she just knew it.

Uncle Walter assigned her number 8 as her very own. He showed her how to enter her number 8 by pushing the yellow buttons. The red buttons was dollars, the next row was ten cents, and the last row was ones. One, tens and hundreds, she had learned that in first-grade. Now she was all grown up, had a job complete with a clerk number, and she remembered her ones, tens, and hundreds.

After entering the sale price, Uncle Walter grabbed hold of the lever handle that stuck out on the right side and pulled it down. It made a sound that gave Beatrice goose bumps. It was a sort of a ring, she could only imagine was the sound that angels make when children are good, or at least that is what Grandma Reis used to tell her.

Beatrice watched as the number 8 and 1.35 showed up at the top. She was convinced that Uncle Walter was the most brilliant man she had, or would, ever meet. To think that he has things in his store that people need, and even some things they just want, and they pay him money for it just so he can go out and buy more things so more people can come in and pay him more money. Brilliant may not have been the right word, he was beyond brilliant, but Beatrice Miller couldn't think of a word to describe that, her vocabulary was far too limited.

"Now it is your turn," instructed Uncle Walter. "Pretend I am a customer and I want to purchase these gloves." Uncle Walter reached across the counter and selected a pair of gloves from the display. The sign above them read; SALE \$.75.

Beatrice thoughtfully and accurately pressed the yellow number 8, the 70 and the 5. She then grabbed the handle on the side lever with her right hand. With great precision she pulled the lever down and heard the sound of angels.

“Very nicely done,” said Uncle Walter. “Here is my dollar.”

Uncle Walter handed her a pretend dollar bill. Beatrice smiled, took the bill, said, “Thank you.” She then pressed the large rectangular button in the center of the register.

“You’ve been observing. I didn’t show you how to do that,” Uncle Walter said.

“Yes sir, ever since I can remember,” she said with great excitement.

The wooden drawer popped open and Beatrice’s mouth dropped. She had never seen so much money. The drawer was divided into little sections; each section containing one type of coin or bill. She had finally seen the pot of gold. She had found her pirates treasure. Uncle Walter was not only the most brilliant man she had ever known, he must be the richest!

Beatrice traced the letters - N a t i o n a l - that were fixed to the front of the cash drawer. *National*, even its name sounded regal. Beatrice remembered when she was just a child of three or four, standing on the other side of the counter, gazing up at this amazing gold cash register, hoping that some day she would make the angel bell ring. Beatrice made the angel bell ring all day long.

Today she was all grown, and at the age of twelve and a half, and with Uncle Walter's expert training, she had a clerk number and was allowed to ring customers transactions, take their money and make the angel bell ring all on her own. She knew this is what she wanted to do for the rest of her life.