

## Helen Potrebenko / MIDNIGHT SHIFT

It must have been the winter of 1972-73 that I was locked in that cage on the midnight shift.

In 1971, when I had only one semester to go to get my university degree, I owed the income tax, car insurance and several personal loans as well as, of course, the student loans.

I was already driving cab weekends for Henry Olson. Nobody would give me a weekday car because I was only a mediocre driver. About February, 1971, I got a job driving a delivery truck for B.C. Piston and Shaft for \$1.75 an hour. (A friend went around telling people I worked for Vancouver Screw and Gear.) The reason they hired women was, to quote the manager, because "women are better drivers and you pay them less." So I carried around tailpipes and mufflers and carburetors and crankshafts and drove all over Vancouver for \$1.75 an hour while men doing the same work earned \$3 or \$4 an hour. I still drove cab for Olson on weekends. It was the winter it snowed a lot and they only put snow tires on my truck after much argument. Snow tires don't help much in wet Vancouver snow. But women are safe drivers.

My feet were always wet but I thought I should pay off the most urgent debts instead of buying boots. I also thought it would stop snowing soon.

My best jeans, then my second-best jeans got ruined by grease from the stuff I was carrying around. So did my ski jacket. I was working seven days a week, I was always tired, and my feet were cold. I asked for a raise. Don, the manager, told me I couldn't get a raise because the other driver had been working there for five years and only got paid \$1.95 an hour. "You can be replaced by a boy, you know," Don said.

Both us drivers quit about the same time and were replaced by boys. Both the trucks were smashed up within a month. (There are always a few joys left in life!)

Then I worked for three months for a women's group run by the Young Socialist League and the League for Socialist Action

(Trotskyites) who had been granted an Opportunities for Youth grant to find out about the availability of abortion and birth control. I accepted this job because I thought at least my clothes wouldn't get wrecked from carrying crankshafts.

The Young Socialist League/League for Socialist Action had at the time decided that a concentration on the abortion issue was a way to draw women into radical politics. Through abortion, women would begin to understand the exploitative nature of capitalism. The Opportunities for Youth grant was to be used to stimulate mass politicization of women through education about capitalism as evidenced by the lack of choice on abortion, and cause them to accept Trotskyite leadership in overthrowing the capitalist system.

As employees, however, we denounced the absurdity of leading women from abortion to revolutionary socialism on a three month government grant. We tried merely to fulfill the grant requirements which were to collect and compile information on the availability of abortion and birth control in B.C. and the Yukon, in itself, quite a job at the time. We didn't earn enough to live on because we had to pay all the attendant expenses out of our pay.

At the end of the three months, I was so completely demoralized by my inability to find a decent job that I got another student loan and went back to finish university, while still driving cab for Olson on weekends.

Olson was the only good boss I ever had. He spoke to me only once in the two years I worked for him. I can't remember what he said. I can, however, remember some of the volumes the Young Socialist League/League for Socialist Action spoke at their employees. It mostly had to do with them being true revolutionaries as opposed to me and my ilk who were holders of bourgeois values (like wanting boots in winter).

So I went back to university and did a brilliant Honours paper and got a first-class Honours B.A. I rushed into the Driver's Room one day waving the notifying letter and announced to the backs of the drivers who were there filling out their sheets that I was now an Honours B.A. First Class. Nobody said anything. I repeated the

stupendous news. Still silence. Finally one of drivers said: "Guess you'll be asking for a steady car now, eh?"

And so it proved to be. Although I asked for a steady car, I didn't get one and for most of 1972, drove cab on a spare basis which was only about forty hours a week. Another driver once asked me what I did with the rest of my time. I said, "You know, most workers only work forty hours a week and get coffee breaks and like that." He looked embarrassed; I don't suppose he did know. He never even went to the bathroom the whole nine or ten hour shift. Unlike me, he turned in really good sheets.

I applied for all kinds of jobs but nobody wanted to hire me. Several university professors propositioned me but none would give me a job. Nowadays you don't hear so much about "over-qualified" since most people are overqualified for the jobs they do. To me, in 1972, it became the dirtiest of all words. I was overqualified for everything I applied for. So I continued driving taxi.

In the fall of 1972, I fell in love with an owner/driver named Bob. He drove nights. I drove days. I started work around four a.m. whereas he finished work around four a.m. This had all sorts of comic possibilities which I must admit I didn't see at the time. I must admit I don't see them now either.

I asked Jeanette for a job on the switchboard. At first, I only spared for others a few afternoons a week, while still driving for Olson on weekends. Then Olson sold the car I had been driving which caused the second occasion for conversation I ever had with him. I don't remember what was said although he must have told me he was selling the car.

Jeanette said the only opening for a permanent switchboard job was on the 12 to 8 shift. I thought that was all right because I'd see Bob more often that if I was a cab driver. And that's how I came to be locked in a cage.

The phone rang constantly. I wrote down addresses and slid them down the chute into the dispatcher's smaller cage. His cage was to prevent the telephonists' voices from interfering with his dispatching. The reason for locking us all in was that drivers going off shift turned in their money envelopes through the slot in the



drivers' room. But there was a ground level window behind us through which any thief could leap, or simply point a gun. We were below ground level in our cage and could neither escape nor catch the thief, so the whole procedure was ludicrous. There was, in fact, no actual necessity to lock us in for safety because this lay in the dispatcher being able to call for help on the radio. If we had ever needed help, dozens of cabs would have been there in minutes.

Once trained, I found I could read while answering the phones. In fact, I had to read in self-defence against the way the customers spoke. At first I thought it was just the pre-Christmas madness, then that it was an expression of the joyous season, then that I was somehow personally to blame. At least every fifth person said either "shit on you," "piss on you" or "fuck you." (A few years later, the night telephonist told me it was about every third call by then.) Often it was because the customer was told that the cab drivers were neither pimps, dope pushers nor bootleggers. Or the cab didn't arrive within thirty seconds, or the driver didn't grovel sufficiently to suit some drunk macho jerk. But mostly it was because a taxi telephonist is, by definition, non-human, along with waitresses, telephone operators, domestic labourers and any other women service workers. All the decent citizens, nice family men, promising young men on their way up, budding entrepreneurs, and not excluding true revolutionaries with raised consciousnesses, feel free to pour filth all over women workers without fear of retribution. I went home in the morning out of that begrimed cage feeling like I was wading through heaps of excrement.

The first weeks in the cage, I read a biography of Leon Trotsky who apparently was a brutal and arrogant person. While very depressing, this biography did do me some good in connection with Lorne, the regular night dispatcher. Lorne held something resembling a fascist philosophy and was anti-communist. So one night when he was raging about "get the bums off welfare" and "people should be forced to work or be incarcerated in concentration camps," I was able to tell him he agreed with the great communist, Leon Trotsky, and read him relevant quotes from Trotsky.

But soon I became too demoralized to read. I cleaned the part of the cage I could reach while attached to the headset but the cage grew filthier. Bob grew more drunk and more destructive. I developed a sore throat which worsened each week and began to be accompanied by a mild fever. I was being paid \$2.40 an hour. We weren't given lunch or coffee breaks and as the junior telephonist, I had to get the senior's permission to go to the bathroom. The only break was when Bob brought us coffee in the middle of the night. He was, of course, driving cab and when he found himself downtown during a lull in business, he would come down to the dispatch office with coffee, handing it down to us through the ground level window. It was wonderful.

There were three of us in that cage on the midnight shift. Half the time, it was Lorne on dispatch, Cora as the senior, and me. Lorne made suggestive jokes until he found out I was an owner's girlfriend and then he even had to forgive me for calling him a communist.

Cora was a happy woman and kind to me. I never talked to her about politics, afraid to lose the only kind person I knew on that job. She was a buxom laughing woman of about 55. Now long dead.

The other half the time I was on with Milton Felgar and Danny Ravetti. Milton was a part-time dispatcher and full-time graduate student at Simon Fraser University. I was delighted when I first learned Milton was a student but he soon put me in my place by listing all the professors with whom he was close friends and explaining that he was a radical, revolutionary socialist who knew all about internationalism and correct lines. He had nothing but contempt for mere women, mere junior telephonists with unraised consciousnesses. Thereafter, he ceased speaking to me altogether.

Milton and Danny talked to each other all night. Danny was brutal and racist and sexist and not sane enough to hold down any job but a supervisory one. He told me that if I spoke except in answer to a direct question, I would get punched out. He told me to keep my head down and not look at him, Milton, or Milton's dispatch board, or I would get punched out. If I was forced to ask

the dispatcher a question as a result of a telephone query, Danny would yell SHURRUP. Milton would look pleased. So the customer waited on the phone while I wrote the question on paper and slid it down the chute to Milton who would then tell me the answer which I would then relay to the customer. Before Danny found out I was an owner's girlfriend, he tried to drag me into the washroom to "Cop a feel."

Milton had been taught at university that this brutal, half-crazy man represented The Working Class so he fairly worshipped Danny and they talked all night.

Danny complained continually because he didn't own the taxi company. He told Milton long and involved stories about how he was cheated in the early days of the company when it operated under a multiplicity of owners. Milton agreed that the company needed one strong man to run it instead of a group of small shareholders.

But, Milton, you *said* you were a *socialist*! I said in horror once when Danny went to the washroom. Milton said of course he was a socialist, but what's that got to do with the cab business? I couldn't argue because Danny had returned and would punch me out if I talked to anyone except the telephone, from whence emerged that myriad of voices proposing to relieve themselves on me.

I attempted to talk to Jeanette in the front office about the situation but Jeanette said adults should learn to get along and went away on holidays. I didn't talk to the manager, an ex-cop with rotten teeth, who also wished to drag me off to the washroom. I didn't talk to the union because I didn't know until later that I was in one. Bob was no help; he went to bed drunk, woke up and drank, and carried mickeys around in a brown paper bag to drink from all day.

I left that job in about March. Staggered away sick and dizzy and sweating, out of that filthy cage. Everything had turned grey. Leaning on the Unemployment Insurance Commission counter, dripping sweat, I explained to some grey person about being locked in a cage with madmen.

Then I went to see a doctor who said I didn't have infectious



mononucleosis and filled in a form for UIC. I spent the next six weeks on UIC sick leave because I didn't have infectious mononucleosis, or so it seemed to me in my dazed condition.

Cora is dead. She was killed by a car driver while crossing the street at a marked crosswalk. The next junior telephonist spoke back to Danny, got beat up and lost his job. Danny was promoted. I'm sure Greta isn't around. About once a month, Greta used to call for a cab in the middle of the night, drunk out of her mind. She never knew where she was. It's Greta, I would write on a note to the dispatcher and he would tell the drivers who would drive around looking for her from whatever clues I could obtain from her on the phone. She was always found and taken home. Drivers are a different bunch. I should have stuck to driving. Sheila might still be there; she was afraid to quit because the only other job she'd ever had in her life was worse. Years and pain later, long after Bob and I split up, he quit drinking and got married.

I got my unemployment sick leave cheques and lay in bed, a mess of debts and fever and fear. After a while, a friend brought me some crocuses. I carried this pot of crocuses with me from the bed to the couch and even to the bathroom. I discovered it was spring.

When I recovered, I started writing a new book and went to help picket Denny's Restaurant and was finally with people who were not paralyzed by fear as I had been in that cage — people who cared about struggle and workers' rights without questioning whether or not individual workers had the correct line.

Then I was notified that my Canada Council grant application was accepted, and that was a good year. After that, I got office jobs.

I had been a fervent student at university, bad-tempered and arrogant, but eager to study and read and discuss with those who said they knew. Much of what I was taught was just plain wrong, but in aggregate, it wasn't so much that it proved wrong but that it was inadequate. Nobody explained about cold feet or cages.

I learned a lot about politics, or thought I did. But I didn't know from university that the difference between working for the Trotskyites and working for B.C. Piston and Shaft was that the

Trotskyites paid less. The difference between Danny Ravetti, the aspiring capitalist, and Milton Felgar, the aspiring revolutionary, was that Milton used better grammar.

I have secured good jobs since and spend most of my days blissed out with the pure joy of life and work. I don't remember any more how it felt to be locked in that cage. I remember the physical details but I don't remember how it felt; I should remember because there are many people locked in many different cages. And I remember clearly that my feet were cold when I drove the delivery truck. There I was one day, sliding uncontrollably down a steep hill towards Marine Drive, where there was all kinds of traffic and all I thought about was how cold my feet were.