WILLIAM BEDFORD

# THE FACTORY GIRL

THE SHIFT ENDED AT FOUR O'CLOCK, and as Margarson stood at his office window, he could see the women pouring out of the factory, clattering on the cobbles and shouting to the lumpers on the quays, fooling about and walking arm-in-arm. At the gate, they had to pass the small group of pickets, and several of the girls stopped to sign petitions and joke with the men. The company had gone to Poland for their latest contract, and the men gathered round the brazier were local fishermen demanding that the fish the factory used be caught by the port's own fleet. In the dismal afternoon light, the coke fire burned brightly, and Margarson could see the women's white overalls, the coloured headscarves they wore to keep their hair out of the machines. He stood at the window until he saw the girl leave, and then turned abruptly away and sat down at his empty desk, his hands resting rigidly in front of him.

She had been sent to him that summer because of trouble on the main conveyor. They were processing fish fillets, and the work had to be done in a hurry, a special delivery for one of the chain stores down south. The women had been offered overtime, and everybody was feeling excited. If the contract was a success, there might be more permanent jobs. Everybody was glad of the overtime. The girl was the only one who refused the extra hours.

"I can't do owt with her," the foreman on the section complained.

"She seems all right."

"She just won't listen."

"How do you mean?"

The girl was standing outside. He could see her through the glass partition, smoking and lounging carelessly against the wall, staring up at the flourescent lighting in the ceiling. He glanced again through the file. "She's got good references," he pointed out.

"Doesn't mean owt," the foreman said sourly.

"But what's the problem?" Margarson sighed.

"Breaking agreements."

"She doesn't have to work overtime."

"Setting a bad example."

Margarson stared bleakly at the foreman.

"If you're not going to take my word," the man said resentfully.

"Then go through the proper procedure. There is a procedure. You don't want to bring them all out."

"I want you to talk to her."

"But why?" Margarson snapped in his irritation. "What's the shop steward going to say about that?"

"Unofficial?"

"Oh yes."

"He doesn't mind."

"I've heard that before." Margarson shook his head and then nodded wearily. He couldn't be bothered to argue. "All right," he said, "but this had better not lead to anything."

The girl told him she was sorry. She came in smoking the cigarette and looked round for somewhere to stub it out. She explained that she had a little boy and there was nobody to look after him in the evenings. Her own mother worked nights on the processing, and she couldn't afford to pay for a minder. As she apologised, she lit another cigarette and then smiled briefly at Margarson, shrugging her shoulders.

"I'm trying to give up," she grinned.

Her young face was freckled and warm with sunlight. She had her blonde hair tied back with a coloured ribbon, and the line of her suntan shone through her tightened hair. Her overalls were stained with food from the conveyor, and she stood with her arms folded, her fingers yellow with nicotine, her white boots unpolished and scuffed across the toes. Despite the ribbon, her hair was loose and untidy, and there was something slovenly about the way she watched him, her sullen answers to his questions. He couldn't make out what all the trouble was about, and decided it was nonsense. He called the foreman back and told him the girl needn't work the overtime if she didn't want to. As she left his office, she turned and gave him a quick smile, pocketing her cigarettes and matches.

That night, he tried to tell his wife about the girl. "She's upset Ted Dinsley," he said as he undressed for bed. "Refused to do any overtime. And she came with good references."

His wife was reading, sitting up against the pillows. She smiled quietly, watching him fold his clothes.

"Lives down by the market, opposite the old flour mills." He had noticed her address, glancing through the file. "She works on the fillet processing." He stood for a moment, listening to the noises outside. A van reversed down the street, and a dog barked angrily in one of the gardens. Far away, a train was shunting into the fish docks.

He lay down without looking at the photograph beside his bed. The photographer had insisted on taking the picture for nothing, and then sent them the negatives so that they could order fresh copies for their friends.

"We all loved Lisa," he said, when Margarson offered to pay. Margarson knew that if he argued, the man would start crying. He thanked the photographer and watched him walk hurriedly away, disappearing down the long corridor, letting the doors bang behind him. Margarson had never known a building with so many long corridors.

When he turned out the lights, his wife went on sitting in the darkness, her magazine propped open on her knees, the light from the window shining into her eyes.

The girl stopped him one night as he left work.

"I didn't know about your daughter," she said, as though she had something to explain.

Margarson nodded unhappily, waiting for her to go on, not listening to what she had to say. He thought she was talking about the foreman. He had forgotten what it was like, people stumbling for the right words, nervous at approaching.

She smiled, looking awkward, shading her eyes from the sun. "The women told me," she said when he didn't speak. "On the line. I wanted to say sorry."

"Sorry?"

"About your daughter."

He looked at her, surprised, not knowing what she meant.

She was fidgetting with her shoulder-bag, waiting to get away. She seemed annoyed he was making it difficult. When he realised what she was talking about, he felt embarrassed, upset that he couldn't help her.

"It was last year," he said after a long silence. "People were very kind."

He stared at her white boots, the heels worn down, the scuffed leather on the toes. She had mended a ladder in her tights with different coloured cotton.

"Yes?" the girl said vaguely, as if she'd said what she wanted to say and now she was embarrassed.

"Last autumn."

"Yes. They said."

She glanced out of the yard. She was going to be late for her bus. A man, no doubt.

He thanked her, and walked quickly towards the gates, listening for the sound of her footsteps on the cobbles. When he paused at the gates, shouting goodnight to the security guards, the girl was still standing outside the buildings, watching him leave the premises. He lifted his hand awkwardly, and then walked to where he had parked his car.

The following morning, he found a white rose on his desk. He complained to security about people getting into his office, and made a fuss about all the confidential information they kept on the personnel files. He went on and on, irritating the man from security, and had to apologise when the man made a casual joke about flowers and he completely lost his temper. Later in the morning, he sent for the foreman and said he wanted to see the girl again, pretending he needed to check something on her file.

She came into the office and he told her to leave the door open. "Is it right, you're still not available for overtime," he said nervously, flicking through her file.

She stared at him in surprise. "I told you."

"Only we're having trouble finishing this order."

"I've nobody to look after my little boy."

He glanced up from the file and nodded. "All right."

As she was leaving, she turned at the door."What trouble?" she asked him.

He blushed, moving papers on his desk. "It doesn't matter."

"No?"

"You needn't worry."

She was laughing at him. "Right then."

They were both staring at the rose. His secretary had put it in a glass of water.

"It looks nice," she said.

"Yes."

"Pretty."

"Thank you."

At the end of the summer, she took a week off and went for a holiday up the coast. He checked her file, and kept it hidden in his desk drawer. He tried to find out if she lived on her own, and asked the foreman the name of her little boy. According to the foreman, she was sharing a house with her mother. Driving home from work, he looked for her urgently on the crowded pavements, found excuses to be in the area where she lived, though he knew she wouldn't be back for days. On the Monday morning, he was in his office early, standing at the big window, watching for the arrival of the first shift.

"I got you a card," she said, "but I didn't know where to send it."

She was browner than ever, her face warm and tanned. The sunlight brought out all her freckles. She had her blonde hair scraped severely back behind her ears and off her forehead. He noticed that her front teeth were slightly crooked, and one of them was capped with gold. She smiled at him, her eyes a steady, deep blue.

"Aren't you glad to see me back?" she asked him.

"Of course."

"Did you want something?"

"About the overtime."

She burst out laughing. "You are funny."

"What?"

"You and your overtime."

She came to his office one night when he was checking some figures.

"Buy us a drink," she said with her bright smile. He wondered vaguely whether she was already drunk.

"What about your little boy?" he asked her.

"He's with my sister."

"I didn't know you had a sister."

"Is that right," she mocked him.

They went to a pub, and then he drove her as far as the market.

"Better not come down our street," she told him with her quick grin. She touched his hand, getting out of the car before he could help her. "Lot of folk round here work on the processing," she explained. He blushed violently, watching her walk up the street, then glanced around, nervous of the silent houses.

He told his wife he would have to do the overtime. The company had decided that overtime was cheaper than offering the women permanent jobs, and he ought to set an example. When the girl could find somebody to look

after her child, he drove with her out into the countryside, or down to the deserted promenade. With the darker nights, it was safe to stay around town. They sat in the car and talked, or went for long walks along the promenade. She chattered about her little boy, or the girls she worked with on the processing. He never saw anybody he recognised. One evening, she took him to the local ice rink, and he watched her for nearly an hour, gliding backwards and forwards across the ice, waving to him with her red scarf. He refused to try the ice himself. Twice, they went to a restaurant out of town, and she laughed and talked noisily, drinking too much and stumbling out of the car when he dropped her off outside her house. She asked him to take her to the pictures, but there was nothing she ever wanted to see. He never touched her.

Late that afternoon, he sent for the girl. The pickets on the gate were chanting at a convoy of lorries, and the security police were wearily asking them to leave, fed up with the trouble and worried in case there was an accident with the heavy vehicles.

She knocked on the door, and came in as he turned from the window. He hadn't seen her for three days, because she couldn't arrange her usual babysitter.

"They said you wanted me," she told him with her quick smile.

He sat down, and stood up again to get her a chair.

"I can't stop, we're busy."

He went red, resting his hands on the back of the chair.

She was wearing her white overalls. A trickle of sweat ran down her left cheek from her hair, and she wiped it away, grinning self-consciously.

"Hot," he said, and she smiled, impatient for him to get on.

He turned abruptly and stared out of the window. The pickets were still chanting, waving placards in the air. A police car was parked opposite, and one of the security guards had gone across to talk to the officers in the car. The last of the lorries thundered through the factory gates.

"What is it?" she asked, wiping her forehead with the back of her hand.

"I don't know."

In the heat, his mouth was dry and unpleasant. He wet his lips anxiously, clenching the palms of his hands.

She looked at him, and sighed. "I told you, we're ever so busy."

"I'm sorry."

"I shall get into trouble."

"Yes."

She was out of breath, flushed from running up the concrete stairs. Her eyes looked tired. He could smell the perfume she was wearing, the warmth of her body, perspiring in the overheated office.

He clenched his fingers and felt the nails dig into his hands.

"I have to go," she said.

Desperately, he turned from the window. Her hand was in her hair, pushing it back behind her ears. She was wearing gold earrings, against the regulations. They were not supposed to wear any jewellery. He stared at the earrings, pierced through the pale lobes of her ears. A line of sweat shone on her flushed face. When he looked into her eyes, they were a soft, cloudy blue, and he felt his hands trembling, his legs aching to give way. He lifted his hand, as if to reach out and touch her, and they stood in the hot room, staring at each other across the polished desk, listening to the voices in the outer office. Beneath the white overalls, he could see her breasts pressing against the thin material. He closed his eyes, and leant back against the window.

"I have to go," she said again.

"Yes."

"I have to." She turned to leave.

"Tonight ... ?"

"No."

He opened his eyes in panic. "Please." He could hardly say it. "I want to ..."

She was watching him, her eyes full of tears.

"I want to ..."

"I can't."

He looked at her, seeing the tears run down her cheeks.

"I"m pregnant," she said finally. "I"m going to have a baby."

When she'd gone, he sat down in his chair. He was exhausted. He sat for almost an hour, listening to the sounds of the factory. At four o'clock, he stood up wearily, and watched the crowds jostling through the main gate from the darkened window. When the factory was deserted, he locked the office and went down to get his car.

He drove to the cemetery and parked on the main road. The gates to the cemetery were locked, and he had to climb the stone wall, jarring his elbow and grazing his hands on the gravel. He walked up the drive, and listened to the wind in the trees. The huge tombstones of angels and weeping children stood out blackly against the night sky. The graveyard was full of dead leaves.

He reached the chapel and turned left along the walk where they had buried his daughter. At the grave, he knelt down on the frozen grass, ignoring the pain of his bleeding hands. He rubbed his hands through the grass to clean them, and then wiped them dry on his handkerchief. He could hear the foghorns out on the river, and a factory siren, shrieking for a change of shift. In the darkness, he could see the lights at the estuary, the lighthouse on the distant headland. An owl flew silently between the trees.

The grave was filthy and disordered. The iron container held no flowers. By the light of a match, he read the words on the tombstone. He took a handful of leaves and cleared them away from the gravel. With his elbow, he tried to clear the yellow lichen from the stone.

When he got home, he locked the car in the garage, and stood for several minutes on the lawn, trying to remember what he was going to say to his wife. It was something to do with the flowers, winter roses or fresias for the grave. He was surprised when he found his coat pockets full of leaves, and scattered them impatiently round the garden, drying his hands on the handkerchief that was still damp from the cemetery grass. When his hands were dry, he got his key and let himself into the house.