

# ROMANCE

Can valentines relieve the daily grind, wonders **Rosalind Brunt**

## Love Incorporated

Valentine cards are sent anonymously and supposed to be secret. But because they confer the valued status of being lovable, they are for display and for showing off at work - even if you have to send them to yourself. Telling people the number of valentines you've had and speculating who they are from, are two of the ways people declare themselves participants in customs of courtship and romance.

Valentine's Day may be a one-off event, but it is a regular ritual in the special dynamics that connect courtship with work. The build-up starts immediately in the new year, as much on the airwaves and in cardshops as in canteen conversations and office conspiracies. In the long hiatus between the Christmas party and the holidays, valentine bravado and speculation help keep office jobs sociable and fit into conventional scenarios of heterosexual love, notably the office romance.

At first glance the office romance might seem a contradiction in terms. After all, courtship is identified with off-duty leisure and how could romance blossom within mundane bureaucratic routines? But what goes on in offices is not always or even primarily work. Orthodox economics has neglected the extent to which the labour market is also the marriage market. In Britain, more people meet future marriage partners via work than through any other social institution so office romance is grounded in realistic expectations and to be unemployed risks going unloved. But why should offices figure as such key sites for romance?

Despite certain equal opportunities initiatives, most jobs are still gender-specific and sexually segregated. But the organisation of office jobs does allow for certain close encounters between men and women. So although manual factory work is often more skilled, highly paid and better unionised, when it comes to considering such 'career options' as now exist, girls from working-class backgrounds overwhelmingly plump for office work. For

all their lack of training and promotion prospects, clerical and secretarial jobs are commonly perceived as 'the glamour jobs'.

As Christine Griffin shows in *Typical Girls?*, these jobs combine the middle-class and feminised ambience of a nice clean office with opportunities for meeting a higher-status managerial man: The Boss. For, pragmatically, it is he who provides a route to better economic prospects: out of the office, into the new home, returning later, perhaps, as the older, wiser, married part-timer.

The boss has different but matching expectations. In a much-quoted Alfred Marks Bureau survey of the 70s which asked male managers what they looked for in the ideal secretary, a woman with the so-called 'personality' attributes of youth, appearance, accent and 'grooming' was automatically assumed, with precious little mention of job-related skills.

The ideal secretary is the ideal fantasised mistress and/or 'office wife'. And it is no surprise that the office is also the arena for the sort of sexual harassment that often culminates in the ghastly rituals of the office party, where, in the name of jokey informality and apparent annual equality, desperate sexual coercion ensues.

But if office culture is rife with sexist innuendo, compulsively straight behaviours and marriage brokerage, how can this also be the setting for romance, whispered intrigue and valentine delights? Maybe it's precisely because of the oppressive and restraining aspects of office jobs that office workers must daydream, must imagine and wish things otherwise.

For men, the content of the fantasies may come straight off the office calendar or the tabloids. But not always and not only. Fortunately, there are other images of office romance that don't derive their force from limited pornographic imaginations.

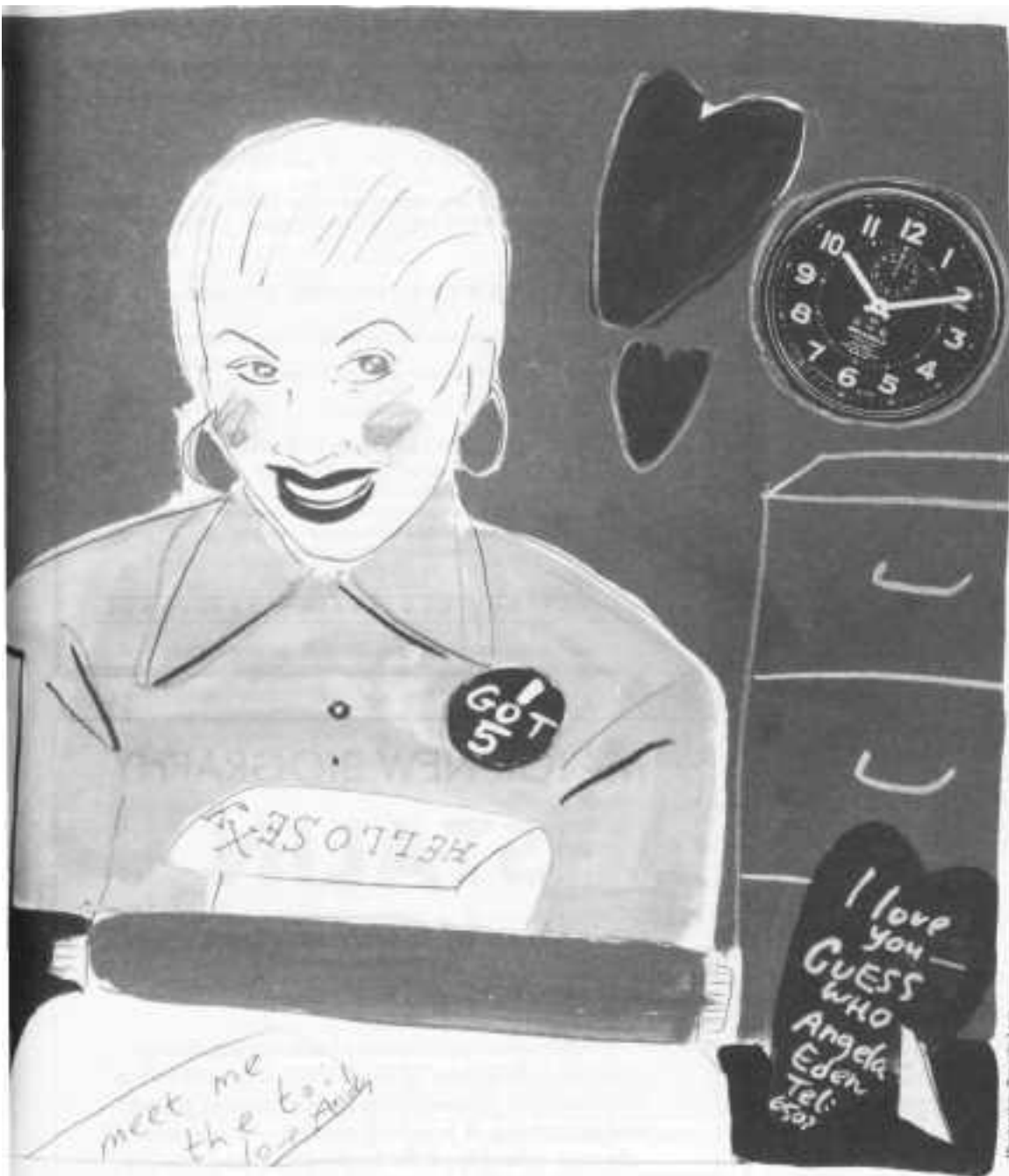
One of the most potent of these images offers the possibilities of a professional-colleague relationship between men and women



rather than the hierarchic one of Boss-secretary. It was celebrated in those cynical Hollywood comedies of the 40s and 50s where the newly 'independent woman' gave as good as she got in the battle of the sexes across the news-paper office or staff room, even if she settled for mushy subordination in the final reel.

And, in the same tradition, how else account for the enormous popularity of the American tv series *Moonlighting*, if not through its

constant interplay with the conundrums of economic independence, emotional dependence and erotic longing? The bitter-sweet tease of *Moonlighting* was its perpetual promise that somehow Maddie and David would finally find equality and equilibrium in both love and work - those two areas, as Sigmund Freud remarked, that most vitally express individual humanity - since everyone else in the office, and we the viewers, knew they were really 'made for



each other' as both colleagues *and* lovers. Besides which they had the most exciting sort of office job: running a detective agency afforded massive opportunities for mutually supportive and daring rescues.

But as the common perception of office work is, to the contrary, one of safe and predictable dullness, the real-life office positively demands to be invested with the sparkle of love-interest. Hence the eroticisation of the workplace in which seen-but-

unnoticed co-workers suddenly zoom into sharp focus, coffee breaks become magic moments, eyes lock across the Xerox machine, hands tremble mending it. All at once Mr Stuffed Shirt is imagined without his trousers and, most famously of all, under the appraising male gaze, Ms Prissy takes off her glasses and lets down her hair.

Such fantasies derive from the inequalities of power in offices and transcend them only in imagination. But transcendence is at least a

start and the intrigues of romantic love may offer strategies for surmounting the banal regularities that office procedures require. The American therapist Ethel Spector Person makes this point in her new book, *Love And Fateful Encounters*. She argues that the power of romantic passion lies in its transcendent quality, its enlargement of the potentialities and intensities of living, the way being in love appears to make anything possible.

But Spector Person is not so good at distinguishing between that appearance and the actuality. Her enthusiasm for love's life-enhancing properties, makes her downplay its negative social effects. The magic circle of office romance, for instance, can have very unmagical consequences for the often involuntary 'third parties' of romantic triangles.

When Deirdre Barlow found out about husband Ken's affair with Wendy Crozier at the *Recorder* office she countered his feeble vacillations about 'needing time' with the forthright declaration: 'I told you, Ken. No sharing.' No doubt recalling the fate of Ken's previous wives via suicide and a faulty hairdryer, Deirdre won the sisterly support of friends in *Coronation Street* with her ringing refusal to iron his shirts and have him crawl back into her bed after visiting 'your fancy woman, your - secretary!' Brave words, but she was crying her eyes out, alone, in front of the television on New Year's Eve.

The 'other side' of romance, the extent of the pain it can engender with such jealousy and loss of self-esteem that death itself sometimes seems the only way out, may be the ail-too real emotional results of what started by making the office sparkle for a special twosome. But as Ken said, it was never *meant* to happen this way. In such triangles, the intention is always that somehow love will triumph by simply polevaulting the pain barriers in its path.

Such belief in love's process is undoubtedly naive. But in so far as romance could exert a positive transcendent force and enable us to imagine other possibilities for ourselves, maybe Valentine's Day is as good as any other occasion to begin taking secret desires for reality. Ending the tradition of anonymity, for a start, daring to name ourselves and our delights, with who knows what heavenly transformations of hard days at the office?#

*Love And Fateful Encounters: The Power Of Romantic Passion* by Ethel Spector Person (Bloomsbury £5.99)