

Surviving the Day Job: Six Easy Lessons

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Before I became a full time writer, I had a job counting envelopes. Not colored envelopes or large manila envelopes, mind you, but white #10 envelopes. I had to count them in series of a hundred. Even now I can see them flashing in my eyes as I flipped through them blinding myself as though I were looking out at a blanket of snow polished by the sun with dilated pupils. At the end of the day I'd leave the office with spots in my eyes.

Why I had to count envelopes for six hours a day, I don't know (I blocked out most of the experience, I do remember however that the temp agency who gave me the assignment thought it was a perfect introduction to the work world for a recent college graduate—which was cruel as well as delusional) however, I did learn how to cope while I was there and the other day jobs I've had. This is how:

1) I threw away the statement: "I'll be happy when..." Sure I would have been happier if my coworker had stopped adding her pile to mine or I had left that place (screaming in terror) after only an hour of torture. But I needed the money so I fought to be happy about it. I made sure to put the money I earned to good use. Not only was I saving a large chunk for a rainy day and my eventual freedom, but I also traveled to places, bought books I needed (*How to Work with People You Can't Stand* was especially helpful) and attended writing workshops. Working with a purpose makes life easier. When you just work to survive life can be very painful.

2) I didn't label myself. I once worked in the complaint department of a hospital (a place to which I affectionately refer to as Hell on Earth). When people asked me what I did, I didn't say I was a lowly clerk working towards a Masters in Masochism. I said I was a temp. Even when I had a permanent job I said I was a temp because I knew any situation I was in was only temporary. I was a free agent, nobody owned me. We are all free agents. Bosses can fire us, but we too can walk out the door. I never let myself feel like a prisoner.

3) I stayed away from the gossip mill. It's fun really. I love stories and gossips tell the best (of course I was also aware that they were talking about me, but oh well) unfortunately, they are a waste of energy. Gossiping about the crappy boss, social climbers, backstabbers and butt kissers is good time poorly spent. Yes, offices have a great cast of characters to talk about, but spending your lunch break complaining all day is not good for the spirit. Take a walk, listen to music, you're at your present job only temporarily and complaining about being there won't make you feel any better about yourself or your situation. Remember you're a temp your future looks bright. Most of the gossips and complainers will still be there years later older and more miserable. I know. I've gone back. It's rather sad really.

4) Do your best. I hated counting envelopes. At times my eyes would well up with tears at the thought of facing another day (I did that with most of my day jobs to be truthful); however I was one of the fastest counters there. I made it into a game and set challenges

for myself. When you do a good job you are doing yourself a service and things will be pleasant. Work to please yourself. I've worked in customer service and I know people can be bleeding obnoxious; however, if you don't like people, please don't work in this department. (Yes, I'm speaking to everyone at fast food restaurants, retailers and health care providers. Learn how to smile!)

5) Come up with an escape plan. I don't believe in endless suffering. If you have an abusive boss or your job is giving you headaches and ulcers, Leave It. I don't care what kind of money you're making. Ask for a demotion or start looking in the Want Ads. No job is worth your health. I walked off one job that was completely demoralising.

6) Live your secret life NOW. At any job I was on I pretended I was an author who was there doing research for my next book. It helped to make the atmosphere more interesting. The woman who ate my lunch (damn those blasted office fridges) and pretended not to know it became a character I poisoned; a boss that liked to make fun of my name became a hobo with a severe speech impediment. I imagined how I would write my autobiography; I would practice my answers for when I was interviewed on TV. My imaginary life made my reality much more exciting. Try it; you'll be surprised where your imagination can take you.

Sometimes we have to do things we don't like, but they don't have to be an agony. I had many jobs that I couldn't stand, but I knew they were only temporary. Remember: This too shall pass and your future looks bright.