

Jill the secretary sits next to me at work most days. She peppers her daily routine with the occasional insult to whoever has been unlucky enough to forget to make her tea. 'Forgotten me, have you?' she'll call out sarcastically and then stare balefully, from ancient eyes, a stare to stop the Underground, the Thames from flowing. She wears old clothes, strange suits cut in a strange way, things made in the early eighties she's still getting the wear out. Her hair is short and unfussy, stained yellow, flopping carelessly over a face which misses and catches nothing. No grace has she, and behind each rare laugh are a trillion cigarettes, a painful death. Around her neck she wears a silver necklace which spells out 'Mum'.

It was her fiftieth birthday last month. She came into work as usual, walked in off the bus with her bag. Someone had cared enough to blow up some balloons and these had been blue-tacked onto the wall behind her computer. A little girl doll with black dreadlocks and a blank face sat on her desk, holding a tiny banner which read 'Old Git.' She acknowledged all these with a silent nod and sat down. I gave her as sincere a smile as I could muster at 8.30 in the morning and carried on working, hitting the keys on the keyboard, typing myself up into a frenzy of efficiency, leaving the pleasantries to others.

But at ten o'clock she asked me shyly if I would like to see a picture of herself which she had 'found in her bag.' I needed the break and nodded. She passed over a small photograph, stiff as cardboard.

I looked down at a couple standing on a balcony, smiling fuzzily at the camera. A young girl in a pink mini-dress stood arm-in-arm with a man. 'Where is this?' I asked. 'Benidorm,' said Jill reverently. I cooed trying to feel something but eventually had to pass it back to her feeling inadequate, wishing I'd found something to say that matched the moment. When someone shows you their life, what are you expected to notice?

Later on in the day, as the sun rose ignored over the building and the buzz in the room swelled and burst, she brought the photo out again and showed it to her boss, a bullish former scrum-half in his early thirties. He took it and looked at it and responded in his own way.

'Wow Jill, what a stunner.'

And then he passed the photo to other powerful men in the office, and they all took part in the game, making appreciative comments, passing the ball around, trying to outdo each other.

'Your legs look great.' 'Can I take this home?' 'Yeah, where's the photocopier?' she watched them and hacked out her laugh, and giggled and moved around in the chair and that's when I noticed her, passing herself around, passing her youth around, like birthday cake.