

## Ask Anne

Anne had not expected to find herself out of work, not after she had struggled so hard to gain her word processing qualifications. Her mother had told her that pride comes before a fall and Anne had certainly been proud when she had opened the envelope with the results of her examination. She had taken the course as a part of a government initiative encouraging women back to work. In her case 'back to work' had come many years after her last paid employment. Anne had done something that was very unfashionable in the 70's, she had given up work when Wendy, her daughter, was born and stayed at home. For Anne, marriage had meant forever, so when Peter walked out it was like, well, what was it like? A door being closed in your face? Hitting a brick wall? When the pain had eased to point where she could talk about the break up of her marriage without dissolving in tears the only way she could think of describing her feelings at that time was to say "I was gob smacked!" There had been no warning. She had no idea that anything was wrong. With the twenty twenty vision of hindsight, she could see the signs that she had missed at the time. She could see, now, how their lives had drifted apart. They had stopped talking, in any meaningful way; her world was Wendy and the house; his world was his work, the pub, football, cricket, snooker, darts; he went to away matches, he went with his mates on stag nights and booze cruises. She occasionally went out with him, on high days and holidays, but on reflection she could see that he had grown a life outside of her; a life without her. So when he walked out, saying he had met someone else, why was she surprised? But she was and she missed him. The loss was almost unbearable; it was a pain that stole her voice, her energy and almost her very will to live. She felt so alone, so lonely. Yes, she had friends, other mothers; children are great for that; she met them at mothers and toddlers groups and then the playground when Wendy started school. She had been a willing babysitter for other mums, the working mothers. She was always willing to collect Wendy's friends from school when their mother's were held up at work or had other appointments. She had numerous offers of the favours being returned but it was seldom necessary. Anne organised her time so that she could pick Wendy up from school and take her to various activities, such as brownies, gymnastics, music and so on. So, when Peter left, there was a plentiful supply of people to sympathise, plenty of a shoulders to cry on and more than enough advice. But when the sympathetic shoulders went home and the door closed she was alone. It was Anne and Wendy against the world; that's how it felt, anyway. She spent a long time feeling sorry for herself, who wouldn't? But she had Wendy and she would find a way to keep going; to create a safe, secure and stable environment for her daughter. She was determined to ensure that as far as possible Wendy should stay as distanced from her parents' problems as possible. Anne was determined that Wendy would be able to complete her education and have the opportunities that Anne had missed; the opportunities that Anne had denied for herself.

In the beginning, when Peter had walked out, all Anne longed for was Peter to come home and to heal their family circle. But it wasn't long before the another bombshell dropped. Peter's new love was pregnant. This was like a wake up call for Anne. She realised that Peter was lost forever and she had to get over him or go under.

"You need some legal advice", one of the other mother's told her as she sort tea and sympathy after dropping Wendy off at school one morning.

"A Solicitor? I can't afford that!"

Maybe not but why not ring the Citizen's Advice Bureau? They will be able to put you right about what to do so that if you do see a solicitor it won't cost you as much." So that's what Anne did. The outcome was that she found a solicitor, filed for divorce and was granted maintenance for Wendy. Peter was also ordered to make a contribution to the mortgage and the household bills.

However, she would need some extra money so the only option for her was to find a job. She had no qualifications and no experience. Citizen's Advice Bureau, again, told her about opportunities for women wanting to join the work place and directed her to the job centre. And that was how Anne found herself doing a computer course, learning word-processing, spreadsheets, data bases etc and office skills. The initial course was twelve weeks and on completion Anne applied immediately to do a further course at the local college. This was all during the day so once again she could be there for Wendy when she was home from school. But Wendy was getting older and it was easier than Anne had expected when she began to think about getting a job. Anne's first toe in the water was a work experience placement arranged for her by the job centre. On her first day she thought she had never been so scared in her life. She was placed in the office of the college where she was studying her computer course. Her job was a general administrative role, reception duties, typing for the teaching staff, filing, making up information packs etc. She didn't realise how much she would enjoy working. It was so lively, full of hustle and bustle. She loved the students; she met new people, learned new skills and felt that for the first time in her life she was independent. It was so liberating! And then, , when her placement finished the college offered her a permanent job, part time but a job with her own income! She could hardly believe it; how lucky could one girl be! Here she was nearly forty and she felt that she was just beginning to live. Just like the old saying goes, life does begin at forty!

And this life was good! This was a whole new Anne. Work was empowering. She felt valued; it mattered whether she was there or not. She invested in a new hair style, new clothes and she was able to buy treats for Wendy. Anne discovered that she was a capable, competent person who could earn her own living, run a home and look after her daughter. Now, when she thought of her past life with Peter it was like thinking of another person, someone else's life. She loved her new life, the new Anne. She was meeting new people, making new friends, going out occasionally and she began to have dreams and hopes again. "Who knows", she thought, "I might meet someone new, someone to share my life, someone who might love me, might care about what I think, my opinions; someone who will dance every attention just on me!"

Then, in that inimitable way that happens when you are not looking, Life intervened and pulled her up short. Once again, the lynch pin of her world was pulled and it began to wobble. One morning when she arrived at work the Principal called a meeting of all the college staff. She announced that due to financial difficulties and in order to ensure that they could continue to offer a range of courses and attract a viable number of students, the college would be merging with another institution. Jobs would inevitably be affected. Alarm bells rang in Anne's head. How did it go? Last in, first out? She realised that not only was she amongst the least experienced staff member she was also on of the newest. She was worried, of course, but Anne decided that this time her world would only wobble, it would not shatter. She would have a contingency plan.

That afternoon, when Wendy got home from school, she found her mother sitting at the kitchen table, a mug of coffee in front of her going cold.

"Hi Mum, what's wrong?"

"Nothing, darling, how was your day?"

"It was fine, I know there is something wrong don't change the subject"

"It's nothing for you to worry about"

"Yes it is; if it worries you it worries me and I am old enough for you to tell me if there is something wrong. You're always telling me to tell you if I am worried about something, so

you tell me. It's always been you and me against the world ever since Dad left, right? So tell me!"

Anne looked at her daughter and sighed. She smiled and said,

"Ok I'll tell you"

So Anne explained to Wendy about the colleges merging and about how she feared that she may lose her job.

"Oh" Wendy said when her mother had finished. "We'll be all right, we always have been."

She paused. "I'm nearly sixteen. I could leave school, get a job?"

"No, Wendy, I haven't worked and struggled to keep this roof over our heads so that you can follow in my footsteps, leaving school with no qualifications and taking a dead end job or marrying the first charmer who comes along and getting pregnant. No! If you want to leave school and get job, well Ok, but you will have the choice of doing what you want. I am determined that you will be able to choose now rather than struggle later to fill a dream because you couldn't follow it when you were young."

Wendy looked at her mother with one of those world weary, all knowing looks that teenagers are so good at and exclaimed "Mum!" She gave a big sigh and added, "Well what are you going to do?"

"I don't know. I thought I might write down my options, see what they look like. You could help if you like?"

"OK!" Wendy replied.

She fetched pen and paper and after sitting there for a few minutes and having written nothing, Anne suggested that Wendy do her homework and they would think about it later.

Anne started to prepare their evening meal. As she did so she switched on the radio. It was the news. As she potted around the kitchen, getting out saucepans, peeling vegetables and setting the table she only half listened until an item attracted her attention. It wasn't earth shattering or even particularly unusual. The item was about a doctor who was unable to practise his chosen profession in this country because he had to take further exams in the UK, which he couldn't afford. In order to make some money and to feed himself he was working as a cleaner. Anne thought "how awful, what a waste" and then she thought "good for him" and then the light bulb appeared over her head. She had an idea!

Anne grabbed the pen and paper and started writing down all the chores that people hate doing. Why not make use of all those years she was at home; all that time she was perfecting her role as domestic goddess? She would offer her skills as a service to others. How many people had she heard say how much they hate ironing or cleaning the oven? Most people hated housework.

She called Wendy and told her the idea. Wendy thought about it for a moment and said "Brilliant idea! Good on you' Mum!"

Where to begin? She would start with a bit of market research. Anne decided to invite some of her friends and neighbours over for the evening. She would put on a few nibbles and a glass of wine and ask them, if they had the opportunity to pay some one to the job they most hated what would it be and what would they pay. The list was predictable, ironing, cleaning ovens, washing the indoor windows; all those jobs that she knew, since she had started work she had not had time to do routinely and you would find excuses not to do at all. There were some surprises as well such as clearing up the mess after a party, washing nets and cleaning carpets. She went on-line to find out about starting a business; she and Wendy sat down at the computer to design some fliers to push through doors; she found out how much it would cost to place an advertisement in the a paper and she was set; ready to launch herself in to the world of domestic service. As the time loomed for her to make the application for her post she got more and more excited about setting up her own business. After all, if she worked for herself she couldn't be sacked or made redundant and if she failed she would have only have herself to

blame. If the worst happened, and it all went pear shaped, she still had her office skills and computer qualifications didn't she?

When the time came and the axe fell, Anne took the risk. She placed an advert in the local paper and a card in the local newsagent and post office. She invested in the printing of the fliers and she and Wendy spent weekends pushing them through doors. It wasn't easy. At first Anne answered the adverts of others for cleaners but it wasn't long before she was getting replies to her own modest marketing campaign. She found herself dusting, cleaning bathrooms, washing floors and indoor windows, cleaning ovens and ironing. She was popular and reliable. It was hard work but she enjoyed it. One of her earliest clients was Janet Ryder, an estate agent. Janet ran a small agency with her husband Jack. This position at the Ryders was a routine cleaning job. She went for two hours, twice a week dusting and the vacuuming the downstairs rooms one day and the upstairs rooms the other. One particular morning, when she arrived, she found Mrs Ryder at home. Janet Ryder had her hand bandaged in a fairly dramatic way.

"Carpal tunnel operation" she said to Anne by way of explanation.

Bored with being unable to do very much, she asked Anne leave the dusting and join her for coffee.

"I don't have much time. When I finish here I have another job to go to!"

"Oh Please, do sit down for a bit! I'm going stir crazy here with no one to talk to and unable to do anything! No one is going to die if the dusting doesn't get done today" Janet said with a smile, leading Anne to the kitchen. They sat together at the kitchen table and over coffee Janet asked Anne about herself and so she learned how Anne had come to start her business.

"You know, Anne, I think we could put work your way from the estate agency. We manage property for rent as well as for sale. We often need a property cleaned before a tenant moves in. Do you think you might be interested?"

Would she be interested? Do birds fly! "Ask Anne" was born! Slowly but surely the work built up and her reputation spread.

One day she had a call from the mother of a friend of Wendy.

"Anne? This Jenny Osborne, Diane's mother."

Anne had learned on her office skills course that if you smile on the phone it conveys warmth and is welcoming. Anne was smiling now but it was that polite smile of complete and utter non-recognition. She was at loss to know who this woman was and she didn't think she had ever heard of Diane.

"Diane?"

"Yes came the reply, Wendy's friend"

"Oh yes of course" said still none the wiser but trying to sound as if she knew Diane well.

Wendy was a popular girl. She had lots of friends always filling the house with noise and chaos. Anne had always loved it but it did mean that putting names to faces was not always easy. She probably did know Diane but as it happened it didn't really matter as Jenny Osborne continued unaware of the confusion she had caused.

"I don't know if you know Anne, but I am a social worker. I have a client who is being discharged from a nursing home and her bungalow needs a good going over, a thorough spring clean. She has been there for some time. I was hoping it would be permanent but she is adamant about going home so we have to get the bungalow fit for her to live in. I've had a look and all it really needs is a good clean. Can you do it?"

Anne arranged to meet Jenny at the client's home so she could get some idea of what was required and so another string was added to the bow.

If she stopped to think about the path that her life had taken since Peter walked out she had to pinch herself to check she was awake! Anne found that in today's world of busy working men and women there was a keen market place for domestic services. Anne soon found that she needed help to meet all the work. She began by asking Wendy to help her in her spare time and then one or two of Wendy's friends and, before she knew it, she was advertising for staff. If it was legal, decent, honest and domestic "Ask Anne" would provide the service. Anne was head of her own domestic service company. She had staff, she had a web site, she was registered for VAT and she had an accountant!

Thinking about it and 'pinching herself' was what Anne was doing as she sat at the table with these other distinguished women of business waiting for the Chair of the local Business Women's Association, Janet Ryder, to introduce her as today's speaker. This luncheon was to present the local award of 'Business Woman of the Year' and this year the winner was, her, Anne Smith, founder, owner and manager of 'Ask Anne'. She was nearly bursting with pride. She could hear her mother's warning voice, now, echoing in her ear "Pride comes before a fall, my girl. It will end in tears!" But this time she heard her own voice in reply, "No it wont not, this time!" Just this once, she allowed herself a rare moment of self indulgence and enjoyed the limelight.

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