

Hers

Gail Sheehy

ONE Saturday in August of 1968, Carolyn Reed was cutting up green beans for her employer's dinner party, which was why she couldn't be in Washington for the great civil rights march. That night, serving guests who could talk of nothing but the march, Mrs. Reed paused with interest at the elbow of a doctor who had saved her husband's life.

"What do they want?" the doctor was saying. With that peculiar lapse of the rich who assume serving people are simply moving shadows without ears, he took a helping from Mrs. Reed's platter and answered his own question: "What they need is an education."

"Excuse me," Mrs. Reed said, dumping every bean on her platter into the doctor's lap. "If I had an education, I would know how to serve green beans."

Today, Carolyn Reed is leading the movement to upgrade household work. Named last June to head the National Committee on Household Employment, she demonstrates by example that a woman who was born illegitimate, adopted informally by the black kinship network in the South, educated perfunctorily before she ran away at the age of 16 and who became a household worker for the next 20 years, can stop — halfway through her life — dare to say no, and find in herself the presence to be a leader.

But beyond her personal example is her issue — probably one of the pivotal factors in making it possible for a woman to become a leader. And while Carolyn Reed plans to give about five years to the cause of professionalizing household work, her eventual goal is something else.

The dirty little secret is: She wants to go back to being a household worker.

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By the time Ella Council appeared at my door to apply for the job of household manager, I had all but given up. We had limped through the lean years, when the greatest portion of my salary still wasn't enough to motivate my surrogate at home to walk down four flights and buy milk instead of sloshing the baby's cereal with Tropicana. In hope of finding someone who wasn't outright hostile to the job, we had tried the Filipino connection, the Argentine connection — anybody but an American — and now, sent by a household employment agency, here was a woman born in North Carolina.

"Miss Council, you look like a lovely person," I said right off the bat. "Let's save each other a lot of grief, and not pretend this is a time in America when either one of us can feel comfortable about a black woman working in a white woman's home."

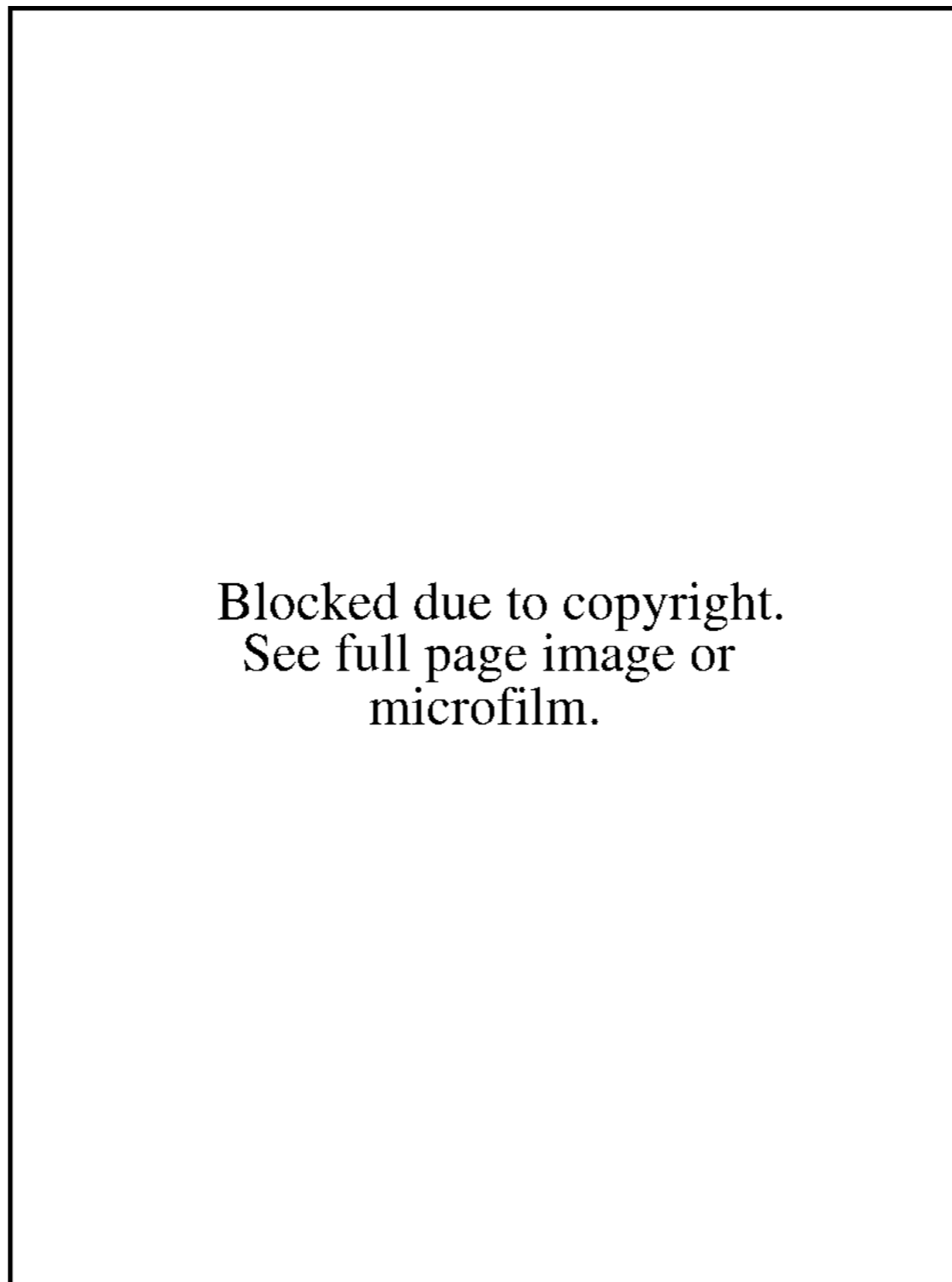
"I like your smile," Miss Council said.

Over the last seven years I have watched Ella Council tame the temperamental players and master the hundreds of eccentric moving parts that make up a home. She is the extended mother to my child, the urban guerrilla who can always find cheap meat or charm the super to fix the leaks, the Jewish mother who leaves me homemade chicken soup for a weekend alone with my typewriter.

The dirty little secret is: I could not manage without her.

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Behind just about every successful woman I know with a public as well as private life there is another



Mark Skolsky

Women and Leadership: Carolyn Reed

woman. The dirty little secret is, all but one of the female leaders interviewed for this series has household help — including Carolyn Reed.

"I can't be Superwoman either," she discovered, shortly after her appointment as the one-woman band leading a national organization with 10,000 members and 45 affiliates around the country. So Carolyn Reed hired herself a household technician (the term she prefers) at \$35 for what is supposed to be a six-hour day. Mrs. Reed may not come home until midnight — but her Mrs. Pope refuses to leave until she arrives. "You go right on to bed, honey," Mrs. Pope will say, "I'll stay to tuck you in."

Now Carolyn Reed knows what it is to have a case of the guilts as an employer.

Why all the secrecy and guilt?

Because both parties to this private compact usually carry some residue of shame — the employee because the antecedents in slavery are still too close; the employer because either she doesn't earn enough to pay the woman she employs a decent living or she earns enough to buy \$100 shoes but keeps a senile vacuum cleaner that thinks it's a blow dryer.

Many professional women tell Mrs. Reed, "Oh, May and I are like family." May doesn't sit down and eat with them, of course, nor does May say much about what's bothering her — usually because she is afraid she can't articulate it or she doesn't want to hurt people's feelings.

"Household workers are very good at lying — to survive," says Carolyn Reed, "until one day they do the disappearing act." Anyone who has been through

this knows it only happens on a morning when the youngest breaks the juice bottle, you have a speech to make in Boca Raton and the dog is in heat.

The theme running through all the complaints Mrs. Reed hears from household technicians is the lack of professionalism with which they are treated. Almost no one defines the job clearly, or pays them on time. Social Security is rarely deducted, preventing them from collecting retirement benefits. To upgrade their dismal income, Carolyn Reed proposes a household technicians' union, tax deductions for general household workers and degree programs in schools. But most important of all is to raise the consciousness of professional women who employ the technicians.

A fair offer by a woman who earns \$45,000 a year, has two teen-age children in New York, and wants a technician to do the cleaning, cooking and laundry five days a week, would be, says Mrs. Reed, "\$200 a week plus a bonus of two weeks' salary at Christmas and two weeks off."

It is going to cost to bury the Superwoman myth. But if the concept of partnerships between women at home and women out in public life catches on, it makes contracts, incentive plans, bonuses and wind-fall profit-sharing sound eminently sensible. Half the household workers have already walked out on the job since 1960, leaving a little more than one million "Mays" to be fought over by the 80 million adult American women. What will it be like in the new decade, when 45 percent of women with children under the age of 10 will be out working?

"They can get all the computers they want," as Mrs. Reed says. "Someone will still have to clean the computers."

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Despite her warning to employees to beware the opening remark, "We want you to be part of the family," Carolyn Reed strongly approves of the personal relationship that inevitably develops. In fact, it was the emphasis on doing by her late and beloved employer that mobilized Mrs. Reed into going to meetings and eventually becoming a leader herself. The employer was Julia Clayburgh, mother of the actress Jill Clayburgh, for whom Mrs. Reed worked 13 years, the last two nursing her during cancer and, near the end, visiting her in the hospital twice a day. On the evening of Mrs. Reed's birthday the hospital called to say that Mrs. Clayburgh refused to take any further food or medication. Mrs. Reed rushed up to find her employer's eyes shut still as stones.

"I'm dead," Mrs. Clayburgh said.

"You've always said that on my special occasion, you would do anything I asked you to do," Mrs. Reed reminded her.

"Oh, no," Mrs. Clayburgh quipped, "not another birthday."

It is hard to die on someone who brings you your sense of humor. Later that night Mrs. Clayburgh took nourishment.

Given the mostly ragged support systems with which we try to make do these days, such relationships are worth all the care and money that can be spared to cultivate them. More power to Carolyn Reed if she can upgrade the professional relationship to the point where it can permit a personal relationship, not as a dirty little secret, but in the spirit of shared human nourishment.