

The Last Shift

“Just a few hours left,” I repeat to myself in a low airy whisper. The excitement for what lay ahead wrestles with the evil nebulous figure tirelessly yanking at the bulging disk in my spine. I’m a full-time associate at an office supply retail store. In essence I’m a psychiatrist riddled with varicose veins, feining for a desk chair while happily counseling whatever dilemma you may have for a pittance.

My place of business is sort of like a public library – but then again it’s really not. While a library and an office supply store share many similarities, one being that they are both equipped with sliding glass doors able to open extremely wide for the most bizarre human beings on the planet – what makes a retail store inherently different is that tiresome little two word phrase every current, past and future retail employee – loves, loved and will come to love called, *customer service*. Sigh...

With my hands behind my back I stand forcibly vigilant, like a homesick soldier manning his assigned position in enemy territory, mindlessly grinding spearmint gum down into a sugar-free goop. Wedged in between two aisles displaying varying species of overpriced black and white doodads manufactured to self-destruct when you need them most, I look out through storefront windows at a sun the color of a ripen mango, slowly descend down a sapphire sky. In that moment I realize my servitude in this emotional battlefield is within its final hours. Who knows with a little double luck maybe a sirocco will sweep through in a flurry of gritty sand making the roads unfit for travel. Sure sales would suffer and a vision-impaired motorist could potentially plow into innocent pedestrians – but one look at the expression smeared across my face and you’d realized how much I cared.

For the hundredth time today, I’ve heard the R&B singer, songwriter and headgear wearing disciple, Ne-Yo ask for an attractive girl with fluid caramel skin to let him love her. For the love of Christ, whoever you are lady, please let him love you.

I rub my hands across my face while taking a deep breath, holding the stationery air in until I’m no longer able. I exhale, dig into my back pocket and pull out my phone. After pressing the center button my heart sinks down, way down – well past my thirty-year-old genetically compromised prostate handed down from my father. “6:45? Are you kidding me? Could have sworn I was lost in reverie for longer than that.” Never in the history of Homo sapiens has a warm blooded, two-leg being wished time away as frequent as a retail store employee. “Where are you sirocco?” I say, believing in a ludicrous possibility while releasing hot air through gritted teeth. “I just need you to say nine-zero-zero, NOW!” directing my frustration at the inanimate object in the palm of my clammy hand. If you can do me that little favor then I can catch the last bus south of the border to Zihuatanejo and walk across a white sandy beach to help Andy Dufresne fix up his dreamboat. Who am I kidding? I haven’t been to Mexico in years. Not since my reckless, concupiscent college days. My idea of freedom and the former banker accused of murders’ idea of freedom are as opposite as a Catholic priest with an acrid fetish and an adult film star who regularly scrolls through the bible. While a cool misty breeze, coalesced

with the feeling of warm sand nestled in between my toes does straighten the hairs on my arms, I'm actually itching at the chance to return up North to Alaska.

In the midst of a darkening parking lot, headlights flashed and a horn sounded. I'm not sure how, but somehow, even though I was stationed inside, I heard the echo of high-heeled shoes tapping against the pavement as if the sound was meant for my ears only. Not before long the sliding glass doors drew back, a rush of warm air fanned my face and in traipsed a new patient.

"Hello and welcome. What can I help you find today?" My perfunctory spiel slowly rolls out from my mouth like thousand-year-old honey oozing from a mason jar. I was once affable, eager – resolute in my beliefs, but it's only a matter of time before a circus show like this shatters the strongest of spirits. Eventually Gandhi too would fold and cough up whatever salt tax Britain imposed.

"Divorce papers!" shouted the emotionally battered, brown-eyed woman with dark silky hair and a boob job worth every penny. "If the mother fucker wants to be in the streets til sun up, fine! He can support himself! I tried, I did, but to hell with being a spiritual martyr" she affirmed, unconcerned about gawking eyes, each taken aback in a drawn out silence that lingered like a thick mist over a swamp. A male coworker of mine, a kind but crude fellow who I will indeed miss, glanced over in my direction and suggestively raised his eyebrows. Perhaps it would have been best had I not seen what he did next – but unfortunately my eyes caught sight of him holding two cheap 99 cent plastic kiddy balls to his chest, massaging them as if they were the woman's shapely breasts. For a spell, I selfishly yanked the woman from her reality into my erotic fantasy where our naked coupling served as revenge for her husband's transgressions.

"God," moaned the peculiar woman fraught with drama. Shamefully, I was still in a far off half-dark murky room and mistakenly took her supplication to the creator as a cry of passion. "I need those papers," she asserted with her head lowered, pressing her cream-colored fingers against her temples. A tear fell from her eye. "I hear ya. And we have plenty of em," I replied immediately filled with self-disgust. "They're right over here," I said pointing toward the next aisle over while deploring company policy which mandated we focus on sells and ignore the free solution which would be to simply download the forms online.

As we walked she kept her head tilted down like a troubled school aged kid heading to the principals office. "I'm sorry about all this. It's quite embarrassing. Coming in here a wreck and having to ask for divorce papers. Bet you get people like me often, huh?" she raised her head, focusing her eyes on me. I glanced over at the woman. Even though black mascara traced long lines down her cheeks, I found her more alluring than ever. "To be honest, no. This is a first for me. It's actually making me reconsider ever getting married," I said jokingly. She half smiled and breathed out a deep hot sigh realizing in the coming months she'd become a new member of a growing club of divorcees.

We turned down an aisle passing shelves of colored construction paper and stacks of foam core. To our left down below on the right were legal documents of various sorts. I knelt down on one knee and glanced over Lease Agreements, Wills, and forms for Power of Attorney.

“Wow, really?” spoke the woman, reaching down past my face and grabbing the shrink-wrapped bundle of forms titled, ‘Adams File for Divorce Kit. “A divorce kit. They make it seem so easy,” she added. “I guess the Adams family knows something we don’t,” I remarked.

Severe tendinitis caused my knees to pop as I stood up. I’ve been battling stiff, inflamed joints for the better part of a decade now. I never really paid much attention to the way my knees sounded, but judging by the wide-eyed look I received from the woman, it must have sounded like New Years Day fireworks in Times Square. “Oh my, that didn’t sound good at all,” she said, grimacing down below my belt then rolling her eyes back up to mine. “Yeah, I’ve had bad knees for the longest now. I’ve tried everything but surgery and there’s no way I’m doing that. I guess something’s in life you learn to live with, you know,” I expressed emotionally.

The woman smiled and asked if I was calling her a bad student. “No, no of course not,” I affirmed. “I didn’t mean it like that. I’m just saying I’ve been dealing with this pain for so long.” The woman looked into my eyes, fixedly – smiled and said, “I’m just giving you a hard time. But you know, it’s funny. You’re here helping me and believe it or not, I’m actually an orthopedic specialist. Pretty fortuitous if you ask me.”

After returning each other’s phones, the woman examined the name under my 10-digit number. “A-dee?” she asked. I wasn’t annoyed that she became the one-millionth person to screw up pronouncing my name. After all, had the married-soon to be-divorced woman not stepped foot through those aforementioned sliding glass doors, my final moments in hell would have never felt so heavenly.