

*if it was a snake
it would've bit me!*

A memoir about surviving the American
public as a grocery store worker



If It Was a Snake, It Would've Bit Me!

A Memoir

Christopher Kincaid

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Names and other information have been changed to protect identities.

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Retail Recollections

Everyone ought to work retail for at least a year. You will get a first-hand experience of how you shouldn't behave. If you are going into psychology, the ministry, or want to become a serial killer, the American public will give you insight and motivation. Of course, not all my retail experiences were bad. Most people were good enough, but the dregs of society are loud. The shopping cart with the squeaky wheel keeps reappearing from the garbage until you take a sledgehammer to it. What follows are my squeaky-wheel experiences. As outlandish as some may seem, these stories are true, even the fictionalized ones. These stories come from a small rural grocery store. I'm sure if you work in a city these experiences will seem quaint compared to the nonsense you put up with. People choose to suck no matter where you live. Although, the American public's suckiness seems to be at a different level. After all, American culture enshrines selfishness as individuality and the "customer is always right" ethos. Sorry (not sorry) to say, the customer is an idiot and is rarely right. When I'm a customer, I become an idiot too. Retail workers just can't say this since eating and having shelter from the weather kind of matters. Businesses allow people to get away with abuse and anything shy of violence (sometimes even violence!) just because those people have money in their pockets. It's the American way, the cult of capitalism. And it's terrible what trash retail workers have to swallow. To balance my ranting, I include some stories of employee antics and, later, customer redeeming situations. I present each situation as a short vignette.

Cold Lovers and Stretchy Pants

Chaining someone to a POS—which doesn't only mean point of sale—ought to be labeled as a cruel and inhumane punishment. Unable to escape, you have to endure the side effects of canned cream corn, the aphrodisiac of the American public. There's something strange about the canned food aisle and people's procreation urges. Perhaps it's the brightly printed labels of muscular green giants hiding the mysterious, often disappointing contents. The secret of the salted, moist, and squishy carrots or the viscous, slimy cream corn is on par with lingerie. Both use metal and color to appeal and fool, to fabricate an illusion of health and

beauty—at an increasing cost based on brand. Cracking open the can, undressing its contents into a bowl, teems with sexual innuendo down to the hand gestures when the kidney beans congealed into a stubborn mass. While most would think the produce section, with its cucumbers and Eden underwear, would be the center of hi-jinks, canned food promises modern solutions to aging and decay. Perhaps that promise is what turns people on most of all: the promise of eternal youth, fresh picked, and preserved forever in a wonder of metal and salt brine. What is sexier than youth for a modern shopper? Canned food is akin to body-shape wear, contorting and squeezing—only to have the reality underneath disappoint. Cream corn promises sunny kernels, the germs of creation, suspended in a smooth sauce beyond nature. Is it any wonder that such canned food titillates shoppers?

One day, a couple placed several cans of cream corn along with white bread, with its luscious soft simulacrum of nutrition, on my POS belt. Thankfully that treadmill of profit was working that day, as was the air conditioner for once. Now women understand what happens when you go from a balmy summer day into an icebox-cold store. Guys, of course, have the same reaction as attested by the male customer's man-cleavage. Both people were, shall we say, girthy and wrapped in tight spandex. Yoga pants and sport tank tops show every Hostess ho-ho. One of them was as wide as the POS aisle. Add in two, and I considered charging them for the human ho-hoes that drooped onto the belt. Now, I'm a short guy, which, unfortunately, placed me at eye level with her glass cutters. The woman's not-so Little Debbies were having their natural reaction to the cold. The cream corn was making lover boy, who was already hot judging by the smear of sweat all over his face, trying to climb into the woman's yoga pants. As she tried to pay, he rubbed his hands all over her generous bottom—and I'm being generous by saying only "generous"—and toward her front. Yoga pants don't hide anything. They shouldn't even be considered clothes for the purposes of decency. I doubt a poncho could hide the effects of canned cream corn was having on the couple. After moaning and slotting her food-stamp card (I mean no euphemism here), she and lover boy squeezed out of the doors with their bags of cream corn in hand. I made sure the bread was under the corn, of course, as thanks for the show.

A moment later one of my fellow cashiers came up to me. She looked genuinely sympathetic.

“I saw them when they came in,” she said. “I...had hoped they would go through my line to spare you her, uh, tank top.”

“She was...cold,” I managed to say. It was better than contemplating the alternative. The couple was into each other, at least. Perhaps a bit too into each other.

The cashier looked embarrassed for me. Then she stopped and tilted her head. “I think your glasses are cracked.”

Lesbians and Cream Corn

Now over the years of watching and cleaning up questionable fluids in the canned food aisle, I had come to believe the effects of aluminum vegetable lingerie was limited to heterosexual couples. Most late-night hi-jinks I’ve witnessed, and broke up with a mop, happened down that aisle. In most stores, the canned food aisle stands near the central-most point of the store. Canned veggies need to keep away from the real veggies; freshness can’t compare with technology. Canned meats likewise need to keep away from their fresher origins. No, canned food makes friends with the baking and cereal aisles with their equally technologically astounding mundanity. Cereal conjures feelings of childhood and often contains the wailing results of cream corn’s influence on human libido. The baking section creates feelings of the past intermingled with just how much time it takes to—why didn’t I just buy the cookies? No one has time for baking! Baking is for the elderly and those who like to punish themselves with more work after work. So of all the inner aisles, canned food offers the most vitality and safety from the consequence of Del Monte peas and the baking work of life’s end years. I had seen lesbians get heated by ice cream. Women have a relationship with ice cream that men can only envy. So, I had thought cream corn had met its match. However, not even ice cream can apparently match the primal appeal of vegetables and artificial-forever meats. Of course, one time does not a pattern make. After all, I had seen the power of ice cream often over the years. Ben and Jerry could turn the straightest female friends into lovers. However, I

soon discovered during the night shifts the power of cream corn had on lesbian couples and on gay couples.

“What is that sound?” I asked myself as I wandered through the grocery store. The store was (finally) nearing its closing time. The usual assortment of pajama people meandered in the snack-food aisle. It was a strange smacking, sucking sound. I thought it was the sink back in the deli. It had a tendency to break. I preferred that over the times when the pressure chicken fryer safety valves failed and the pressure needle pegged. It was a wonder I hadn’t yet taken a manual release valve through the chest. As I went back to the closed deli, the sound became louder.

Coming from the canned food aisle.

I sighed, recognizing the sound for what it was now. I didn’t care if people were macking in the aisle, but by then it was eleven at night: time to close. I had to run the dust mop across the entire store anyway, so I detoured to the backroom to fetch it. When I reached the canned food aisle, I encountered two women trying to give each other a tonsillectomy with their tongues. By the cream corn, of course. Neither of them climbed out their partner enough to notice me with my aisle-wide dust mop.

“I’m sorry,” I said as professionally as I could after an over-long shift. “But we are closing.”

They responded with more sucking and macking sounds. Yoga pants and hands again. I sighed—I wanted to go home hours ago and I had to open the next morning. Six AM, just because morning people don’t know how to buy enough coffee for more than a single day. The cashier had called off so she could sleep in like a sane person. I tilted the dust mop as I moved around them, making sure to brush the bristles against one of the women’s sandaled feet. She opened one eye to glare at me. I glared into that eye and repeated my canned phrase with less professionalism. Finally, she pulled away, and her lover blinked her eyes as she awoke from the aphrodisiac effects of corn—seriously why was it always near the corn? The woman I spoke with didn’t flush, but her lover did. They untangled. The woman I spoke with dragged her flushed and dazed lover from the store. Years later, I feel a bit (just a bit) more charitable for them. Rural towns where options to date involve either first or second cousins, at best, are hard on gays and lesbians. In such towns, everything except the grocery store closes at six or seven in the evening. Where else

can you go for clandestine hijinks but the late night canned food aisle? About a month later, the couple were back to trying to exchange tongues, but thankfully they were mindful of closing time from then on. Word must have gotten around, however. Soon after the episode I encountered other couples, heterosexual and a few other lesbian and gay couples in the canned food aisle having deep oral conversations. Fortunately, all had the courtesy not to stay past closing and to heed my pass-by dust-mopping reminders. Many became so regular that they knew me by my first name—I didn't always wear my name tag. Again, small town, and people know of you. I didn't care to know people. Don't think that cream corn didn't have effect on the elderly either. I encountered several wrinkle smooshing down that aisle. I suppose elderly insomnia hit, and they wanted to try out what they had heard the kids in town were doing. Perhaps it was good that the security cameras only covered part of that aisle. I didn't care as long as 1) they left before closing and 2) they didn't leave anything I had to wet mop.

Blood and Watermelon

Speaking of wet mops, if you never worked retail you'd be surprised at how much blood is involved. I still carry scars from machetes. One day, one of the stock clerks came to me with a grim-faced lady in tow. I had wondered if she had gotten into the limes and lemons—some people take the “go suck a lemon” literally. The store is far too inland for desperate, scurvy ridden sailors.

“I need a cut watermelon,” the woman said. She jerked a thumb at the stock clerk, who towered over both of us despite his hunching. Good guy, if shy. The American public hadn't yet beat that out of him as it had me by that time—both the goodness and the shyness. You have to protect the young from the sharks, so I stepped up to the woman.

“Sure, I can cut that for you.”

“I want it in cubes. Make them one inch square,” she said.

I felt my mouth frown before I could smooth it. “Okay.” I turned to the clerk and invited him to follow me to the produce room to train him in how to cut watermelon and to spare him waiting with the woman. Make her wait outside alone.

The day before, I had used a file to sharpen the machete we used to cut watermelon. You could cleanly cleave a customer with it. Not that I was tempted. That would be a mess to clean up. I plunked the watermelon on the cutting table, sliced it in half, and explained to the clerk how to cut the rind off to make a watermelon loaf. It wasn't like I had to slice several bins of watermelon in the past week.

And then I saw the machete slice into my middle-finger's nail. That machete could've cut a can of cream corn cleanly in half. No pain, which warned me immediately about how bad the slice really was. I squeezed my middle finger to kill the blood flow.

"I need you to go to the office and get me the first aid kit," I said calmly. Yes, I actually was calm. My finger was attached, but the blood was running like an open facet despite my tight grip. Why the produce department didn't have their own first aid kit was something I had always wondered about.

The poor high schooler froze, staring at me. I asked him again. Still frozen. I wrapped the finger tight with a paper towel and held my hand up. Blood rivered down my arm to drip onto the one-inch watermelon cubes. And I'm not exaggerating. The blood was a lot.

"Throw the watermelon away, please and clean up if you can," I told the clerk and went back to the store floor.

The customer immediately pounced. "Where's my watermelon?" She glanced at the blood running down my bare arm and soaking the paper towel. "I can't wait much longer."

"You are going to have to forget about your watermelon right now." I shook my hand at her and, dripping blood along the way, walked to the customer service desk.

"Can you get me the first aid kit?" I asked the office person on duty.

She stared at me as the clerk did, frozen with wide eyes.

I sighed. "Fine." I went to the bank-style half-door, reached over it and opened it, breaking the rules in the process, but I was a manager, I was bleeding, and I didn't care. Policy wonks have a special place in hell. The quite pale officer worker didn't move to help me dig out the first aid kit from its cabinet. In her defense, the watermelon customer came up to the window.

“I’m not happy with how one of your workers refused my order.” I saw the woman cross her arms. I couldn’t see her legs, but I wouldn’t have been surprised if she stomped her foot. “I need to speak with your manager.”

I freed the first aid kit and banged it onto the counter, drawing the customer’s attention. I ignored her—I outranked the office clerk anyway—but made sure the customer could see the bloody paper towels. I wrapped my middle finger tight with gauze and then wound surgical tape around until the top of my finger turned purple.

After I finished my work, the office clerk thrust her thumb at me. “He’s the manager on duty.”

“I...” The customer seemed to have finally noticed how the paper towels could’ve been used to paint a wall red. She snapped her mouth shut, turned, and left.

“Are you...okay?” the office clerk asked. She looked like she wanted to be sick. While I felt irritated with the lack of help—wrapping a finger tight enough to stop its bleeding with a single hand isn’t easy—I knew blood was a problem for her.

I cleaned the counter and put the first-aid kit away. I could see under the tape that the gauze had already reddened. I shrugged. “Yeah, no big deal.”

She nodded.

I fetched a damp mop and cleaned my trail back to the produce room. In the room, the stock clerk had managed to scrape the watermelon into the trash. He sat in a chair, looking as pale and sick as the office clerk.

“It’s all good now.” I smirked and flicked him off with the bandaged finger when he looked up. He laughed and a little color returned to his face. I had him go do something else while I finished sanitizing and cleaning the bloody cutting table.

In retrospect I should’ve gotten stitches. While my my circulation-ending tight wrap worked, and the bleeding had slowed a lot by the time I got around to redressing it at home, my finger bled for a good week. The half-split nail caught on everything until it grew out. When the lighting is right, you can still see the white scar underneath the nail.

Blood, Boxes, and Breakage

The watermelon escapade wasn't the only time I bled for my paycheck. As the frozen manager, quite literally frozen I will add, I often had numb hands and skin. Gloves offer little defense against the blowers inside the storage freezer, but after years of hiding in there, being buried under frozen pies—which feel like rocks when the stacks collapse on you—I grew so used to the cold that 70° would make me sweat and feel too hot. Even now, after years of being freed from the shackles of retail grocery work, exchanging those chains for the chains of public libraries which have their own set of shall-we-say interesting people, summer murders me. Well anyway, one day I was working through a massive shipment of stock. So massive that I forced the regular grocery order to be split across two different semis. Mind you, this was a small grocery store, so, um, oops! I was booking it, not in the librarian sense, but in the I-have-four-pallets-of-inventory-melting-in-the-aisle-and-another-eight-in-the-freezer sense. Of course, the warehouse was nice enough to put all the sale items on the pallets stuffed in the back of the storage freezer. Customers, of course, also decided they wanted those items this very minute and were getting in my way while asking me where the sale items were.

“Hey, your frozen veggies don't look so frozen anymore,” laughed the twentieth customer to say the exact same thing as they stood in my way. I was finally down to my last aisle floor pallet.

The man looked up the aisle. “Is that blood?”

“Yeah, we've had a shipment of chicken that wasn't wrapped well,” I said. Whenever there was a chicken sale, that happened. I threw the last box of stock on the shelf, pumped the pallet jack and pulled my pallet of sale-veggies toward the back room. The customer followed.

“You should put a display of manhole covers in the aisle,” the man said with a smile, as if he was being witty. Little did he realize how many times I had heard a “joke” similar to that.

“Right by the ice cream right?” I asked.

His smile faded a little. “Y-yeah. Might help you with blood in the future.” He leaned closer to me as if to share a secret but spoke loud

enough for the dairy department on the other side of the store to hear. “Manhole covers are those things women need when on the rag.”

“Ooooh,” I said as if I hadn’t that line before. I forced a chuckle in the hopes he would go away. “That’s...a good one.”

The old man straightened and beamed. He winked and then strode off. I sighed.

After squeezing the stock into the storage freezer, I snatched a mop before I yanked my next stock pallet out. A few quick swipes fixed the blood problem, and I pulled out the next load. I was almost finished with that load when an old woman came up to me.

“Sorry to bother you, but there’s chicken blood or something in the aisle.”

“Again?” I frowned. I thanked her after smoothing away the frown. Customers have been devouring any sale item I managed to put out, and I wouldn’t get to the bulk of the sale items until just before I had to leave for the day. I really needed to talk to the meat manager about...I looked down just in time to see a droplet of blood fall from my forearm and splatter on the floor. I turned my arm to see I had gashed it using my box cutter. I had stripped to my short sleeves after working up a sweat in the aisle. Despite feeling hot from running around, my skin was numb from the cold.

Another time I had finished handling my new frozen shipment and so went out to give the grocery department a hand. I didn’t have to, but I don’t believe in departmentalization. Siloing workers only leads to people sitting on their hands instead of helping others. Well, the store manager was stocking the shelves with some of the stock clerks. Retail of all types never learn the lesson: cut your hours, you slit your own throat. You can’t sell what isn’t on the shelf. Once I got off my box of pickles—the soapboxes were still buried in the backroom--I hefted it and zipped down the canned food aisle. I passed one of the clerks who had a case of cream corn on the floor. She was looking at the label and back to the shelf with her brow knit, no doubt confused by the mysterious feelings the item stirred. The place for it was right in front of her. I was near the pickles when my numb hands gave out.

Crash!

Whoever decided glass pickle jars should be shipped in thick boxes was a genius. Juice still leaked from the box, but it's nothing like how baby food jars explode into sharp shards of glass that you can't dig out of your skin. The store manager just shook his head. After cleaning up that mess, I proceed to drop a case of spaghetti sauce. Those boxes aren't engineered for breakage. Two jars make a fine mess. As it happened the store manager was stocking whole kernel corn in the same aisle. He looked over at me.

"No more glass today," he said.

Perhaps the worst breakage involves wine. Bottles of wine explode nearly as fine as baby food jars. Most wine bursts happen with a woman's purse catches the bottle. Wine stinks—I don't know how anyone can drink it, but then I'm allergic to alcohol. Ever unload a beer truck on a 95°F day? Hives and migraines ensue. Wine will also strip the wax off the floor if it sits too long, and wine breaks will always happen when you are pestered by customers and unable to get to it. By the time you do, there's been six lanes of shopping cart traffic through it.

Trails of Gold

When it comes to shopping cart traffic, people will run their carts through anything. Wine, blood trails, spaghetti sauce. It didn't matter what was on the floor. It was as if people went out of their way to run tracks through things. A baby food holocaust could be on the floor in an mile-wide aisle and someone would tramp through just because. After all, shopping carts are monster trucks without the huge wheels! One busy day (of course it's busy) a mom pulled a kid with vomit caked down his chest into my checkout.

"I'm sorry, but my son got sick in the back aisle."

After I rang her through my lane, I went back to the aisle to see a pile of what looked to have been at least three not-so-Happy Meals. Now I can handle blood, diarrhea, and other things, but vomit is something I can't handle. I clenched my jaw, and then the lone cashier called me back to the register. Two abandoned shopping carts happened to be nearby. I emptied them and sat them on their handles to block off the hot fast-food smelling pile until I could get back to it.

After what felt like an hour of ringing people through, man stepped up. “Someone left some carts in the way in the back aisle.”

“Yeah, I’m the only one here, so I will get to it soon.”

Several customers later, a woman told me about the pile and the carts. “Are you going to get to it?”

I glanced down the snaked queue of people. About an inch of snow had been predicted for that night, so people were raiding our beer and cigarettes, bread and milk and otherwise doing the usual first-snow panic buying. Because, after all, Ohio’s winters *never* had snow (never mind sometimes getting a foot or more of snow). “I will as soon as I can.”

Her eyes narrowed. “It smells terrible back there. Like bad fast food. You should clean it now.”

“I will make like an amoeba right now and get to it.”

She stared at me blankly. “What’s that?”

“It’s a one-celled organism that can split themselves.”

She frowned. “That doesn’t make sense.”

I smiled while I silently wondered about the education system. Didn’t everyone know single-celled organisms split themselves to reproduce? “Is there snow coming?” I asked to change the subject, as if snow wasn’t what everyone was talking about.

Her expression softened. “There is a lot of snow coming tonight. Over an inch!”

When the poor cashier and I finally handled the mob, I snatched a bag of clumping cat litter on my way back to the aisle. The carts were gone. Someone had moved the carts out of the aisle. Cart tracks cut lanes through the thick mess, smearing it down the next aisle. Someone had gone through the effort to move the two carts, which I had sat up so no one could wheel them out of the way. Usually the public moves like water, moving around any obstacle. But this one time, when I counted on their laziness, someone had decided to “be helpful” and put the carts away. Now, most of the time people won’t put their carts back, leaving them strewn all over the parking lot and abandoned in the middle of aisles in the store. Again, I counted on that, admittedly annoying, normal American behavior to keep the mess contained. My assumption failed.

The desire to track their shopping carts through everything overwhelmed laziness!

The worst place for vomit is in the checkout line. A mother once held a kid who was launching chunky projectiles over her shoulder. She stood patiently at the end of the line, seemingly oblivious to her son. No hurry, no concern. The cashier rang her through as the kid attempted to paint the floor gold and green. The sound of the splatter and the kid's whimpering heaves filled the air along with the usual scent of people's despair. The kid, if he could've said something between hurks, would've begged for mercy. He glanced at me with a "please help me" look before attempting to break Olympic discus throw records.

The woman dug a bag of coins out of her purse. "I'm sorry, this is all I have."

The kid responded with another splatter.

The mom counted out the coins. "I'm sorry, he ate something bad I think."

As they left, the kid laid out a bile carpet.

Kids aren't the only ones who rewind their esophaguses (esophagi?) in a grocery store. Beyond the occasional stomach virus, the beer section suffers from the most rewinds. Add in the inevitable wine or beer bottle breaks. People don't stay home when they should.

Ping Goes the Valve

The deli clerk yelled over the intercom for the assistant manager and me to report to the deli. We shared a look before rushing to the back. Well, if you can call a leisurely stroll to the back a rush. Rarely did anything happen that demanded us to hurry. When we reached the deli, both clerks were waiting.

"The fryer is red," she said.

"Red?"

"The gauge. It's red. Pegged."

The assistant manager and I hurried then. The fryer's pressure valve was indeed pegged in the red. The entire machine quivered.

“I-I don’t know what to do,” the assistant manager said.

“There’s an emergency pressure valve,” I said. “We just open that—”

The deli clerk shook her head. “It’s broken. We tried that. It won’t open.”

“Let us try it,” the assistant manager said.

The emergency valve was at the base of the machine. The handle resembled the spicket you’d see on an outdoor water hose. He grabbed the handle and tried to turn it. It had seized. The machine shook harder as the pressure continued to build.

“I can’t get it,” he said. He stood up and reached for the lid’s handle. He jerked back. “Damn, that’s hot!”

The deli clerk threw us hand towels and fled backward. He layered the towels and gripped the lid’s handle. The lock had already been released. We just had to turn the lid’s pressure seal without frying oil exploding upward and turn us into crispy chickens. We strained against the wheel, but it refused to budge. A little steam screamed out.

“Try the other valve. Maybe we can release the pressure with both,” the assistant manager said.

He strained. I strained. Nothing.

“Hell with it. Get back,” he said. “We don’t get paid enough to get blown up.”

The machine quaked. The pressure gauge’s needle had disappeared.

We stepped back.

“What are we going to do?” the deli clerk asked.

The assistant manager looked at me. I shrugged. “No idea.”

He mirrored my shrug. “I guess we let to blow up and clean up the mess afterward.”

The deli clerks gaped at us. The older woman shook her head. “What do you want us to do with all the chicken orders? The other fryer is broken too.”

“I guess we have to call the customers and tell them the fryers are down,” the assistant manager said. He sighed. “I’ll take the heat tomorrow.”

The machine quaked, thumping the greasy, worn floor. Finally, the safety valve gave up. It shot off horizontally a thud of steam. The remnants of the valve banged the stainless steel preparation table and pinged up to smash against the already battered drop ceiling. We heard it clang against the metal ceiling and ricochet among the pipes and conduits. The fryer's lid burst open and smashed against the wall. The scent of burnt, greasy fried chicken flooded the space.

We went around to look at the steel table. The valve left a significant dent. I let out a long breath. That valve would've shattered my shin.

If a Cart is in the Way, Ram it

Walking a shopping cart back into a building is a lot to ask of people. It's even harder to ask people to put the carts into a carrel in the parking lot. No, carts are best left in the middle of parking slots so a good wind can blow the shopping carts into the street to block traffic or into the giant trucks that claim to be as tough as rock but dent when you look too hard at them. Carts do a number on those compensation vehicles. I was on cart collection one evening when this black smoke belching Goliath of a truck roared into the parking lot. Now this was no farmer's truck, the rust buckets that have been beat to hay by hell and more but still run. No, this truck was chromed up and down by a wannabe farm boy. Country music blared from the truck, whining about the usual death of dogs and girlfriends who finally realized how they liked the mileage of a Ford Focus over a Ford F-whatever-XL. This monster of a truck sat high on suspension that no true farmer would spend a decade of wages on.

The black behemoth hit a group of shopping carts that sat in a space as I watched. Now I had thought riding so high in a vehicle would give the driver a better range of vision while, of course, blinding all drivers in the other lane with its halogen lights. Apparently not. The truck slammed into the shopping carts and plowed through them, sending the stainless steel carts surging every which way. The truck's driver jumped out of the cab and strutted toward the grocery store without a second glance. He wore almost thigh-high cowboy boots. I had learned two things already. The first about pickup drivers' field of vision and that thigh-high cowboy boots somehow existed. The waddle came from being unable to bend his knees, I supposed rather than from riding horses. I walked over to gather

the strewn carts, fully expecting them to be dented. They were fine, but the man's chrome bumper was a mess of scratches and dents from ramming the carts out of the way. In fact, one of the carts the truck hit was infamous for having a squealing wheel. Its piercing, sine wave squeak had made me take it out back multiple times in the hopes it would be picked up with the next dumpster drop. But always the cart returned. Amazingly, the cart didn't squeak anymore!

All the cart escapades happened with pickup trucks. It's not that there were more of these vehicles. Despite being a rural grocery store, we saw more mileage-efficient cars. Farmers weren't dumb enough to drive into town using a gas-guzzling truck if they couldn't help it. Only the lads from town who wanted to prove their farmer roots liked to paid \$20 just to rev their engine once. Another time a truck rammed a cart out of the way—the parking lot had only one other car in it—only to send the shopping cart off like a javelin to hit that only other car. Of course the car was fine. The truck dented. In another episode, I saw another pickup ram a shopping cart, which, again could've easily been avoided by parking elsewhere. This time the cart careened into the street, forcing a passing sedan to swerve to avoid it. Of course amid all of this bumper-cart fun, you will sometimes see an old man collecting shopping carts. You've no doubt seen his type, the war veteran from way back who can barely walk, but that doesn't stop him from hobbling across vale and dale to help harried retail workers like me. He (like me and other cart wranglers) narrowly avoid getting hit by trucks, car doors, horses—Amish horses can sometimes be mean—while cleaning up after far more mobile people. I always appreciated these old dudes with their military veteran caps. One regular helper, who often witnessed the “young lazy dumb-asses in trucks”, to use his words, hitting shopping carts confronted one of those “young lazy dumb-asses” after I almost got hit. Dodge-ball is for amateurs. Dodging pick-up trucks is where the real competition is. I wasn't sure what the old guy told this young lazy dumb-ass. By the look on the veteran's face, I wanted to get some distance so I wouldn't have to fill out yet-another police report. But whatever he said, the “young lazy dumb-ass” in that truck started collecting carts whenever he visited the store. I wished that Harley-riding veteran could've been hired to speak to

every lazy dumb-ass customer who left their shopping carts every which way.

Another time I saw a granny almost get hit by a truck driver (again its always trucks. Sedans handled the drug dealing in the lot) as she shoved a pair of carts toward the store. So many close calls. Sadly, there were a few collisions that weren't close calls. One kid got hit by a truck as he rode his bike through the lot. The kid's legs were shattered beyond repair I heard. Fights would also ensue, much to the polices' sighs, when people would back into each other's cars while trying to make a parking space during a 5-hour sale or some other sale gimmick designed to bring out the worse of American society. I had fewer problems with the nightly drug dealers than I did with the pickup truck drivers. At least the drug dealers would return their shopping carts when they bought their marijuana munchies. One dealer, who no doubt dealt in the heavier stuff judging by his car—I never understood why dealers all drive the same souped up cars. May as well paint a glow-in-the-dark “I'm a drug dealer” on the side of the vehicle—was one of the most polite and helpful late-night cart gatherers.

Signs are Hard to Read

But then again, writing a glow-in-the-dark “I am a drug dealer” sign wouldn't have helped business too much. The first rule of designing signs, after all, is: no one reads signs. During a big milk sale, the supplier had decided to flirt with the metric system, requiring them to retool their entire manufacturing line to support 3-liter plastic jugs. This caused problems that led to shortages. Of course the sale was at a crazy price for the time (this was back in the early 2000s), something like 2 “gallons” for \$3. We gave a full 12 feet, out of a 24 foot dairy case, to 2% milk. We sold out only 2 days into the sale. Well, I wrote a 12 foot sign saying something akin to “Drinking too much milk makes you fat.” Okay, seriously the sign nicely said “Sorry, we are sold out of milk until tomorrow morning.” While I was stocking the rest of the department, a woman wandered up. She stared at the banner—all 12 feet of it with bold, clear letters—then she looked at me. She looked at the banner again and frowned. Looked at me. Looked at the banner one more time and again back at me.

“Do you have any of the sale milk in the back?” she asked me.

I gestured at the banner. “Sorry, we will get a shipment in the morning.” I felt charitable at the moment, a rarity for me after so many years of the American public beating charity out of me, so I just thought she was illiterate. It wasn’t unusual for the town. Not common, but not unusual.

“Why did you sell out?” she asked.

I gave her the truthful spiel about the manufacturing problems. She accepted the story and left without a complaint. I went back to the yogurt.

Another woman came up. She looked at the banner then looked at me. Banner. Me. Banner. Me.

“Do you have any of that sale milk in the back? She asked me.

“Sorry. Not until the morning,” I said. What were the odds two illiterate people would arrive after each other? Not high, but not improbable either.

“Why didn’t you put up a sign? I wouldn’t have wasted my time coming in if you had,” she said.

I glanced at the twelve-foot sign. I felt my brow furrow. “Uh...”

She cursed under her breath, calling me an idiot, and left. I frowned after her, truly puzzled. I wasn’t just imagining I had put up a sign right?

A man came up. Banner. Me. Banner. Me. Banner. Me.

“Do you have any milk in the back?”

My sense of charity slipped. I saw a pattern forming that I didn’t like. I offered my canned response with the spiel about the manufacturer. He muttered something derogatory about the metric system and left. An older woman stepped up and repeated the routine. Three looks at the banner and me followed by the same-worded question. I wondered if I was stuck in some sort of folded space-time loop. By the tenth person to repeat the ritual, I wanted to reply:

“Of course! I knew you were coming so I kept a jug of milk specifically for you!” Apparently each person thought the sold-out sign didn’t apply to them or that the store was holding milk in the back for fun, profits be damned! When I finally finished the dairy, I hurried away just as another person began the banner look ritual. The cashier soon called me with the

question. After filling what sale items I could in each department, a customer flagged me down. I braced myself for the milk question.

“Do you have any of the sugary-cavity-I-might-as-well-eat-a-donut-in-milk cereal that is on sale?”

“Sorry, we are out until tomorrow. I just filled everything we have in the back.”

The man fidgeted. “Can you check in the back for me?”

“I just looked. We’re out. Sor—”

“Can you just look for me?” The man frowned.

“I will double-check.” I went into the backroom with the customer following me until the door swung shut into his face. I banged around a little. And then sat down on last week’s left over stock for five minutes. It was ten at night, and the store closed in another hour.

When I emerged, empty-handed, the man asked, “Did you find any?”

“We’re sold out until tomorrow’s shipment. Sorry.”

“False advertising as usual. Never have anything I want when I want it,” he muttered and left.

The store was busy for a small town on a weekday night. Just my luck since I had to be back in at 8 AM to deal with the shipment. At closing, three customers approached. “Do you have any of that sale milk in the back?” “Do you have any of the sugary-cavity-I-might-as-well-eat-a-donut-in-milk cereal that is on sale?” I didn’t leave for home until half to midnight.

The long (very, very long) years of grocery work taught me that people do exist on some strange telepathic level, repeating the inane questions verbatim with the same inability to read signs when the signs deal with something they want right now. Each week brought some synchronized question, phrase, or political topic repeated in the same way by dozens of different people. I wondered if customers had some cult where they met to memorize whatever ritualistic phrase that week’s star alignment demanded. Of course, most people in the town watched the same news broadcasts, repeating whatever the talking head said word-for-word. You have to admire that level of memory and that level of thinking for oneself.

The Phrase

Members of the customer cult have a single phrase to identify themselves as members. Disguised as a joke, this phrase must be uttered when unable to find an item directly in front of you. This phrase is thought to open the hidden door to El Dorado, to the magical door hidden in every grocery store that opens to the land of Milk and Bread, a land of flowing Rivers of Beer and endless fields of Mrs. Fields. In this mystical land, canned cream corn, so invocative of Aphrodite's hair, stacks high, forms the walls of your bedroom so that you never need seek the public canned food aisle should that not be your thing. This phrase, so magical, links to the serpent of Eden. The incantation stretches deep into humanity's collective mythological mind and fear of what the serpent can do to us, of the scarcity the serpent represents. Even though I am not a member of the customer cult, I know the phrase. Because I was a grocery store worker for so long, I'm barred from the El Dorado, for I've eaten of the J-Hook of Knowledge. I have seen through the cracked door to that magical land, the land without sold out signs. At the risk of locking you out of this land too, dear reader, I must share the incantation with you:

If it was a snake, it would've bit me.

You must speak these words whenever you ask a store clerk about the location of an item and the item sits near you. Asking where an item is works better than trying to find it yourself. When you ask the clerk, you need to call the clerk over too, no matter how far down the aisle she works. You can't relinquish your position lest you give up a possible location of the magical door. Let's practice.

You see a store clerk with her arms full of product and bellow at her. "Can you help me find the Double-chocolate Triple Chin-Roll cake mix?"

The clerk, well-trained and fearful of losing her paycheck should you give her managed a bad comment about her, scurries over with her arms full of product. She shifts the load to lift a cake box that sits right in front of you on the shelf. Unfortunately for you, another box sits behind the first—no magic door to be seen.

Still, you say, "If it was a snake, it would've bit me!" Then you chuckle. The chuckle on cue is critical.

The store clerk offers a wane smile. “Is there anything else I can help you with?”

Here you can try to repeat the process to press your luck, or, better, turn her down and move on. Your chance to find Shanghai-la has passed for today. But you will have other chances so long as you keep repeating the unique witticism that is “If it was a snake, it would’ve bit me!” as if no one else has ever said the incantation. After all, the phrase is witty and shows how “in” you are with the cult of customerality!

Now, if the clerk fails to offer you the dead-eyed, soul-shredded smile appropriate to the over-used phrases—after all, dozens of customers will be seeking El Dorado each day—you have the obligation to repeat the phrase to test the clerk’s hearing. Enlightened members of the cult will have other witticisms only available to the truly initiated. These pillars of consumerism seek to find the item before the clerk can and then turn the incantation: “If it was a snake it would’ve bit you!” or “I’m glad that wasn’t a snake”. These higher level magical sentences are said to identify you as Enlightened to the right clerk who would offer you a glimpse into next week’s sales out of gratitude should you ask for next week’s advertisement afterward.

Store clerks who do not react at all to your phrases need to be avoided. They’ve been so jaded by other members of the cult that they will weld the doors of the Promised Land closed for everyone, including themselves, just so they could never hear such words again. I stand among the jaded, having heard the identity phrase multiple times a day for over fifteen years. I considered bringing in cobras just so people could be bit by a snake.

Beyond the phrase, you also find customers who take running jokes like the snake bit to the extreme, lasting years to decades. A common practice is to invent a nickname, derived from one of the clerk’s family members and then insist on calling the clerk by that nickname. Say a clerk’s father is named William. You would then insist on calling the clerk Billy even though the clerk’s name is Melchior. Then, whenever you see the clerk, you say loud enough for everyone shopping to hear, “Hey Billy!”. Carry that joke on for years, coupling it with the snake phrase whenever you can: “If it was a snake, it would’ve bit me, Billy!” If the clerk refuses to open the way to the Land of Bread and Beer, annoy them until

they do and never give up. Even after they quit the grocery store, keep the nickname going. Forever. After all, jokes work like wine, improving as they age!

Mangoes and Mangoes

When I worked produce, I foiled one customer's effort to parrot "If it was a snake, it would've bit me." The old woman came up to me, "Do you have any mangoes?"

"Sure," I said. I took her to the fruit case and handed her a mango. She was the first customer to ask for the fruit. Usually, mangoes sat in the case for so long that they started to root and grow into trees.

"This isn't a mango." She held the fruit in her palm as if it was a coiled snake.

"Um, that is a mango."

"It's not a mango. They are green."

"Unripe ones are green. This one is ripe and ready to eat."

"It's not a mango!" She shook her free fist at me. "They are green and full of seeds. You know, a mango!"

I took the mango from her and sat it back to where it was going to eventually root. In hindsight, I should've started a mango orchard in that case.

The old woman glared at me. "Mango. You know, mango! Not whatever that is. You stuff beef into them."

"You mean green peppers?"

"Not green peppers. Mangoes! Is the produce manager here? She will know."

"Let's see what's over here," I said. I walked toward the green peppers in the opposite case. The old woman rolled her eyes and then followed me.

I stopped in front of the green bell peppers. "Are these what you mean?"

"Yes! Mangoes." The old woman tisked and shook her head. "If you are going to work produce you really need to learn your fruits and vegetables, young man. How much are they?"

I pointed to the sign that said *Green Bell Peppers*. “Ninety-nine cents per pound.” The woman’s gaze touched the sign, but the first rule of signs immediately invoked. She held up a fat pepper. “Remember for next time. These are mangoes, not whatever that weird fruit was you showed me.”

Want Some Cooties with That?

The produce department had a self-serve bulk food section. These barrels and containers allowed customers to scoop out gummies, dried fruit, dog bones, oatmeal, peanuts, and other foods in bulk. Each container had its own plastic scoop. I loathed inventorying those barrels. I would weigh myself on a bathroom scale. Then I would lift each barrel, the produce manager wasn’t able to lift anything with her ruined back, and stood on the scale. We’d subtract my weight and the weight of the barrel from the total weight. If we sat the barrel on the scale, we couldn’t read the number. Barrels could weigh between thirty and fifty pounds. At that time, I weighed perhaps 100 pounds.

Anyway, self-serve will forever be a terrible idea. Why use a scoop when you could use your filthy hands? I saw a mud (I hope it was mud) caked farmer reach his filthy hand into a container of gummy worms and fill a plastic bag with several handfuls. I lost track of the number of little kids who would come up to the barrel of flour or oatmeal, open the plastic lid and peer inside. Now, I’m a firm believer that everyone needs to keep their curiosity and desire for learning. I would hear a sneeze and a cloud of flour would fly out of the barrel. The kids would lift their faces from the barrel, looking like a geisha. An hour or so later, I’d see a woman use a scoop to get flour out of the same barrel. Of course, I would trash the top layer of flour whenever that happened, but retail being as it is, I couldn’t always get to it in time. Kids weren’t the only ones who did this. I saw a middle-aged woman lean into the flour barrel and then sneeze.

The bulk containers were a favorite hangout for grazers. People would snatch a few candies as they passed. Even the store manager would! He should’ve known better. It’s not that he was stealing from the store. He should’ve known how filthy those containers could be. Whenever I would wash them, I would take a straight razor to scrape the dried nose nuggets that accumulated on the candy containers.

Self-service donut cabinets are even worse. At least with the bulk containers if you dig to the back, you can find some unmolested product. Donut cabinets, however, have no recourse. People love to paw through the donuts, picking up each one and putting it back down until they find just the right one. Never shine a black light in a grocery store! Never, ever, shine a black light on the donuts. And a secret, those discounted day-old donuts might be wrapped, but they had their unfortunate stay in the self-service cabinet just yesterday. So too when a store has a bulk barrel section, any discounted and wrapped bulk food becomes suspect. At one point that flour was likely applied to someone's face using the sneeze application technique.

Grape Skid Marks

Produce that falls to the floor becomes fair game for shopping cart monster-truck antics. Grapes don't stand a chance. During grape sales, the produce department floor would become black with them. People don't bother—and just as often can't bend over—to pick them up. Instead, they crush them under shopping cart casters. Shopping cart wheels aren't exactly wide, so it takes special aim to run a grape over. These unfortunate grapes become trapped and dragged to their ignoble demise. Stomping on grapes leaves a different crime scene. The floor can become slick with grapes before a harried clerk can mop the murder scene.

I emerged with a mop and bucket just in time to see a man throw his hands up. His arms windmilled as he fought to catch his balance. Grapes went flying from his plastic produce bag. He caught himself before he fell, crushing more grapes as he regained his footing. He gazed around the floor, frowning. Without looking at me, he walked away, crushing more stray grapes under his sneakers. I sighed. After mopping the produce department, I went grape skid mark hunting. Every aisle had the tell-tale signs of a shopping cart wheel-grape collision, a long black smear that could extend for half an aisle before the grape was finally freed from its torment.

The Boyfriend

“I need a favor,” the evening cashier—I’ll call her Kelly—said to me one night. I was walking her to her car after we closed. She gazed around the lot and hunched her petite shoulders.

“Sure? What’s bothering you?”

“Could you be my boyfriend?”

“Uh...”

Kelly held up her hands. “Not like that. I mean, you are a good guy, but not for real. I feel bad for asking you this. I just....” A car drove past and she tensed, staring at it until it disappeared. She let out the breath she held. “There’s a customer who just won’t stop asking me out. I tell him no, but he won’t listen. He isn’t stalkerish about it. Just does it every few weeks, but...I don’t like it.”

“Should we call the police?” I wasn’t officially a manager, but I had all the responsibilities of one at that point. All the authority too but not the pay. “Have you told the store manager?”

“No. It’s not that bad. Yet. I don’t want to make a big deal of it.”

I wasn’t so sure about that by her behavior.

“Why do men think its okay to ask girls out while they are at work?”

I shrugged. “You can’t run away.” I meant it for a joke.

She held up a finger. “Exactly. And I have to be nice to them. Pisses me off. Guys should never ask out someone who is working.”

“Do you think me posing as your beefy boyfriend would really deter him?” I asked. I flexed my skinny geek arms. Then I pushed up my glasses. “I mean, you could easily take me.”

Kelly crossed her arms. “It will work. But could you stand behind me when he shows up? I...don’t like how he looks at me.”

I acted like I was trying to look at her butt. She laughed and punched my upper arm. “Yeah. Just more pervy.”

“Is that even possible?” I smirked.

She laughed harder, and the tension slipped from her.

“All right. Just call me up,” I said.

It happened that I was on a first-of-the-month, fourteen-day work week. Kelly and the other cashiers didn't have to worry about those long stretches before enjoying a day off. So I didn't get a chance to pose until two days later. When I heard Kelly's voice, I dropped the ice cream I was stocking—literally—and hurried to the front. I recognized the faint quiver of stress in her voice. I got to the front just as a guy entered the store. He looked like he walked off the set of *Grease* with this black leather jacket, oily (not oiled) hair, and equally oily smirk. I stood behind Kelly and met the man's gaze as he tried to steal a look. Now, at that time I hadn't yet had a girlfriend. My world revolved around earning my way through college and grinding the classes out on my quest for that over-priced piece of paper. So, I didn't know how to act like a jealous boyfriend. I crossed my arms and met his gaze with what I hoped was a glare. Lover Boy turned away and scurried into the dairy department.

"That's him," Kelly leaned back and told me as she rang out a leathery woman buying cigarettes and beer.

I saw Lover Boy in the back aisle. He stared down the distance, and I caught the gaze. Kelly, freed from the leather woman, stepped back so she pressed against me. Across the store, Lover Boy's eyes widened and he broke our gazes to flee.

Kelly smiled. "Did you see his face? I can't wait until he gets up here."

Moments later, Lover Boy strutted up to the register with a bag of donuts. "Hey, Kelly. I love what you did with your hair." He leaned on an elbow.

I stepped up beside her, making sure to press against her side. His eye twitched as he noticed. "It is nice, isn't it? She surprised me when I picked her up the other day."

Kelly played her part with a smile. She flipped her hair at me. "Work takes the curls out too fast though."

Lover Boy frowned at me. My heart thudded at his expression and at how his hands tensed into fists.

"\$1.99," Kelly said.

Lover Boy threw two dollar bills at the belt. "See you." He snatched the donuts and stalked out.

Kelly bumped me with her hip. She chuckled. “That worked! Did you see his face? I think just a few more times, and he will get the hint.”

A few nights later, Kelly called me up. Lover Boy was back. Kelly and I played our roles, never really lying about anything, but we let Lover Boy draw his own conclusions. Kelly was following my lead; I wasn’t one to lie, and thought letting Lover Boy draw his own conclusions was the best option. I was on my fourteenth night of work, I finally had two days off—normally, I would have only a single day after such a stint. Kelly and I left the store with the night cleaning guy locking the door behind us. It wasn’t unusual for a drug dealer or someone else to be loitering in the parking lot at that hour. But leaning against a Mustang was Lover Boy. Kelly drew closer to me, and I wondered if I was going to have to take a few punches. This was before smartphones were inexpensive and everywhere. Lover Boy pushed himself off his car and slunk toward us. Kelly slipped behind me.

Lover Boy stopped in front of us, stuffed his hands into his jean pockets. His shoulders slumped. “Sorry. I-I didn’t know, or I wouldn’t have bothered you with...with asking you out so much.” He looked me in the eyes and then looked away. Even slumped he was taller than me. “Sorry, man. I never meant to try to take her from you or anything. Just wanted to tell you.”

He slouched away, got into his car and left. I saw him at the store months later. He had dropped his Greaser persona for a polo shirt, jeans, and short, clean hair. He avoided Kelly’s checkout lane. Unfortunately, Kelly and a few other cashiers had similar problems with guys, requiring me to pose a few more times over the years.

All That Stranger Danger

I smiled at a pair of Guatemalan men leaning against the grocery store. They nodded and smiled back. One of them lifted his can of Mountain Dew. Sweat streamed down their faces and my own. Summer scorched, but that didn’t stop customers. I was on carry-out duty since, at this time, I was still in high school. I hadn’t yet seen all I would see in later years, scarring me and jading me to the American public, but I was well on my way. This was a time when local, small-town grocers paid high-schoolers,

retirees, autistic, and other disabled people to bag groceries, take them to customers' cars, and load them. Weather conditions didn't matter. I was often snowed and rained on or, as was the case of this day, baked by the sun. Grocers took this bagging service so seriously that the associations held bagging contests where clerks competed to see who was the best bagger in the region, state, and United States. Speed and weight mattered along with the product arrangement. No matter how much the store manager pestered me, I refused to enter the contest. I was a geek, but I wasn't *that* much a geek. Years later, I would meet many lifelong grocers whose crowning achievement would be winning the paper-bag nationals. Great for them, I guess.

I tugged at my tie and collar--white shirts with ties were the dress code—as I bagged for a middle-aged woman. I followed her out, my mind wandering.

“You need to call the police,” she told me.

I blinked and came out of my daydream. I was working on a new barbarian build in *Diablo 2*. That game was my digital crack in those dial-up Internet days. It wasn't like grocery work required even half a brain. “What?”

“Those men were standing there when I came in,” she said. She gestured with her eyes at the Guatemalans. “They are dangerous.” She opened her sedan's trunk.

I gazed over at them. “They are just standing in the shade. It's hot today.”

“They're dangerous. Look at how they watch everyone. See! There's another. Call the police.”

An older man I often helped with my broken high-school Spanish joined the younger men. The older man often would laugh after I helped him find whatever item he needed for dinner and put his arm around my shoulders in a grandfatherly way while he thanked me. He wrapped his arm around the shoulders of one of the young men. No one could mistake the family resemblance between them.

“There's no need. The old guy is nice. That's his grandson,” I said.

“Why do they always have to group together like that?” The woman rubbed her arms.

“Uh, if you were in a country where few people spoke your language, you’d hang out with those who could speak with you, wouldn’t you?”

She paused. I could see her thoughts on her face. Then she frowned. “That makes sense, but still, they shouldn’t be standing around there talking about people.”

“They were talking about the football, um, soccer game they watched.” I pointed. “That guy was talking about his wife back home from the little I could understand.”

“Well, they shouldn’t be standing here.”

I finished loading her trunk and closed it. When I looked up, the grandfather lifted his chin and waved at me. I smiled and waved back. I then looked over at the woman, who watched me with her eyebrows knit tight. She turned without another word, got into her sedan, and left.

Unfortunately, that wasn’t the only time people were upset about the “dangerous” Guatemalans. The men were seasonable immigrants that harvested the farms in the area. The farmers who sponsored their worker visas even offered free English schooling for any who wanted to take lessons, which they sometimes practiced on me when they visited to buy their *cerveza favorita* on Fridays. The workers knew my Spanish was terrible, but I was willing to try to help them with Western Union forms and finding whatever in the store. Whenever the grandfather would treat me like one of his grandsons, which was every time he came in, white customers gave me terrified looks. I would always have to smile and wave at them while trying to translate whatever the grandfather was looking for. Now, I don’t like being touched, but I make some allowances. I didn’t know if friendly touch like that was a cultural thing or not, but there was no harm in it. It was better than the church huggers I had to endure. They tried to smother me with perfume.

One day, Grandfather came in, asking if his *cerveza favorita* was back in stock. We had sold out last week, and the beer shipment was also late that week. A large, bearded man stood nearby. He saw the arm wrap around my shoulders—which Grandfather had to reach upward to do despite how short I am—and stomped forward.

“Hey! Let him go,” the bearded man said.

Grandfather was jabbering at me about a football, soccer, game his team won and didn't notice the man.

I held up my hands at the bearded man. The man was wider than both me and the grandfather side-by-side. "No, it's okay. He just wants to know if his favorite beer is in stock."

Grandfather now noticed the man. His arm slipped from my shoulders and with it his smile.

"People like him need to go home and stay home," the bearded man said.

Grandfather looked at me. I must have had a stricken look on my face. He smiled sadly at me and patted my shoulder. "Muchas gracias, nieto." He stepped away from me, and, under the gaze of the bearded man, left the store. I never saw the grandfather or his grandson again.

Copping a Feel

In addition to bagging groceries, clerks were scheduled to weigh and price produce for customers. During those shifts you were responsible for keeping the produce department filled, but you also couldn't keep away from your scale for long. Not even the Pope could absolve you of the sin of making a customer wait. People would get testy if they had to wait to get their weight. One evening after school, I was chained to the scale with how busy the evening was. The entrance opened and a leather-woman stumbled in, supported by two equally leathery old men. I call them old, but they were perhaps in their 50s. Smoking, drinking, and too much sun made them look like they were even older. I could smell the alcohol as soon as they entered. The leather-woman was beyond sloshed. The man on her right was two-sheets to the wind instead of three. The other man, who I hoped was their designated driver, seemed sober. They four-legged past me toward the beer section, when the leather woman broke away from the men. She moved surprisingly fast for being five-sheets to the wind. Before I could react, she had a hand cupped around one of my butt cheeks and squeezed.

"Mmm. Nicesh," she said. Her hand slipped lower on my butt and curved inward before she squeezed again.

Before I could react, she was gone. I wondered if it had really happened. She was back between the men. The sober man had two 12-pack cases of beer under his free arm. She held onto each of the men's butt cheeks.

Defying Physics

I saw the trail on my way to the stock room. The trail wasn't the normal brown droplets that happen when someone butt-clenches—not the same butt clenching the drunk leather-woman did to me. Nothing so innocent. No, this trail was a solid line, as if someone took a thick liquid, foul smelling sharpie down the aisles. I followed the trail to see where it ended and to assess how I would have to clean the mess.

The trail led into the men's public restroom.

I turned to Kelly who cleaned her register. "Could you mark the restrooms as out of order with a cart and a sign?"

She glanced over and saw the trail. "How is that even possible? It wouldn't run off someone's legs that way."

I nodded and prepared my stomach for what was ahead as I went to the mop room. I filled the bucket with the usual floor cleaner and added bleach. A lot of bleach. Bleach would eat into the floor wax, but I didn't want whatever Level 6 Biohazard that had leaked to make anyone sick. I put on two layers of gloves and mopped the trail. It started not too far into the produce department, near the entrance of the store and traced all the way through. It was as if the person wasn't aware their colon had decided to turn into a hose. By the time worked my way back to the front, the scent had settled in. Living in a rural area where farmers would use cow-manure flingers to fertilize their fields, none of us were strangers to rough scents. Kelly had green around her lips.

"Finally," She rubbed her nose. "That smell is...indescribable."

I held the mop out to her. "You want to go in?"

The green spread from her lips to the rest of her face. She covered her mouth and swallowed hard.

I chuckled. "I wouldn't make you do that." I took a deep breath and hoped the half-gallon of bleach I dumped into the floor cleaner would be enough. "I'm going in."

Physics apparently stopped working in that restroom.

The sight overwhelmed my brain, sparing me from smell of fetid death that had been left out to rot during the summer and covered over with every stinking cheese ever invented. Whoever had entered the restroom had exploded. Poop with the consistency of hot toffee smeared every wall. It even coated the ceiling in large patches. Strangely, other than the trail, the floor was mostly clear. The trail just ended. It was as if the universe had turned the room upside down. I tightened my jaw and held my mop like a shield as I inched toward the open stall.

I looked as if someone had upended ten gallons of brown paint over and into the toilet. Another several gallons splattered on the ceiling and walls.

The bleach water I brought wouldn't be enough.

I left the mop and bucket in the room and emerged for air. I was going to have to revert to a tactic I had used just one other time, during the Crimson, that used the floor drain to my advantage.

"That bad?" Kelly asked me.

I struggled to talk through my lockjaw. It was the only way I could keep my stomach in line. "Someone exploded."

"Exploded?"

I waved her off and went to the mop room for another bucket and more bleach. I was going to asphyxiate myself with the level of bleach I had, but that was better than the alternative. When I returned to the toilet's murder scene, I threw bleach water onto the toilet. Luckily (if you can consider it lucky) the crap was still fresh and hadn't dried. The bleach water sloughed off the worst of it. I pushed the slurry into the drain and mopped the ceiling. The universe didn't favor me by flipping the room. Mopping a ceiling without the crap dripping on me took all my mopping skill. I moved to the walls, wondering if I should've looked for a squeegee. I mopped the toilet seat and the rest of the mess. Thankfully the toilet had no trouble flushing with how liquid everything was.

Then I saw it.

Crammed behind the toilet was the only part of the exploding man that had survived: his boxers. I couldn't tell what their original color had been. Even with the layers of gloves I wore, the thought of touching that

threatened the last of my control. Light-headed from the bleach fumes, I left the restroom.

“I need a trash bag,” I told Kelly.

“Was that the worst one?” she asked.

“The largest, but not the worst. At least the ceiling is clean now.”

“...the ceiling?”

I stuffed the trash bags into each other—paper had more water resistance than those thin things—and turned them inside out. I went back inside and trapped the man’s remains. Retail training needs to include hazmat suit procedures and crime scene cleaning techniques. I always wondered how the main office reacted when they read that anonymous suggestion.

The Crimson

Despite the episode of the men’s restroom, the woman’s restroom was consistently the worst to clean. Sure, sometimes you will find in the men’s restroom a chimpanzee who used a butt-marker to write on the walls, but outside the physics defying explosion I cleaned, the men’s restroom was easy enough. American women, at least the ones who used the grocery store’s restroom, were a different matter. Oh, sometimes you find amusing things like red lip prints on the mirror. I mean, if you want to kiss a mirror that a number of people sneezed on, have fun. You also find green or black nail polish dripped on the sink. But the fact women have periods, coupled with how an amazing number of the public don’t seem to handle them well, made cleaning the women’s restroom a more regular hazmat-suit affair.

One night one of the female stock clerks came up to me. She was pale.

“What’s the matter?” I asked. I had assigned her to the restrooms that night. She was a new hire with only a few weeks experience behind her, but everyone had to get used to the American public’s hygiene difficulties eventually. I had known her since she was knee-high. She was a farm girl, so I knew whatever she saw must have been something else for her to comment.

“I will clean it, but...I want you to see it before I do. Just in case.” Her jaw clenched.

“Just in case?”

I followed her into the women’s restroom. Not even the meat department after a 5-hour sale had that much blood in its room. Liquid diarrhea mixed with the blood on the floor and on the toilet seat. Splatter patterns that rivaled the Milky Way coated the walls. I know women often make toilet-paper nests or “perch” over toilet seats. This woman had perched and shotgunned in more ways than I thought was anatomically possible. What was left of an unfortunate sanitary pad lay on the floor.

“Well, that’s not normal,” I said.

The clerk white-knuckled her mop. “It looks like someone was murdered. This is uncalled for.” Her eyes seethed. “How could anyone be...be so....” She couldn’t find the word.

“Unsanitary?”

She rolled her eyes at me.

I pointed to the drain. “Let’s get a bucket of bleach water and dump it over the toilet. We will splash the walls too. It will go into the drain, that way we won’t have to risk catching anything.”

She insisted on cleaning the rest after we did the bucket splash-clean method. She muttered and cursed and shook her head as I left her to finish.

American public restrooms should be marked with biohazard signs with how often you will find blood, drug needles, overflowing toilets, butt explosions, used condoms (better than finding them on the cream corn shelf—yes, that happened once), and even half-eaten fast food meals. Nothing stimulates the ol’ appetite than sitting on a public toilet to eat your Big Mac! Taco Bell, well that I could understand. Might as well be ready for when that passed through.

I’ll spare you other body-fluid stories. When you work with the public for any length of time, those become endless. The nightmares of fluids still sometimes haunt my dreams. Ceilings dripping brown. Walls running red and brown. If horror movie directors wanted to learn how to terrorize people, they ought to clean public restrooms for awhile.

What One Does for a Dollar

When the customer service clerk called me over the intercom, I sighed. No one called me unless there was some sort of customer-fire to put out. I gathered myself and went up to the customer service fortress. Kelly had graduated from cashier to the customer service office, much to her anger. She wanted to be a stock clerk and escape people. I didn't blame her. She was pale, but she ground her teeth when I arrived.

"I need you to take that customer on the phone." She explained the customer had been overcharged by a dollar when a sale item failed to ring properly. "He refuses to listen to me. He won't stop yelling for my manager."

"All right." I took a deep breath, took the phone from her and held it at arm's length. Kelly hit the resume button.

"WHAT THE FUCK PUTTING ME ON HOLD."

I was glad I hadn't put the receiver to my ear. "This is the manager," I said. "What can I do to help?"

"I CAN'T HEAR YOU."

Kelly crossed her arms and glared at the phone. The man was lucky the glare didn't travel through the line and spiked through his head.

I pulled the receiver to my ear, ready to jerk it away. "My office girl told me there was a mistake." I didn't like to call any of the cashiers or clerks "girls" but I found that the word either settled down irate men or made them feel superior enough that they calmed down. Either way, the word worked like a strange magic. I continued before the man could interject. "I just need you to bring in your receipt, and I will make sure you're made right." Again, I was specific about my phrasing. Roosters needed their feather's preened to shut them up.

"Damn straight you will make it right," the man said in a normal voice. "I have that slip right in my hand."

"Good. When you arrive, tell the office *girl* to call for Chris, and I will fix it." I met Kelly's gaze. *And keep you from murdering him*, I said to her with my look. She caught my unspoken words and smirked, *maybe*.

"I'm on my way." The phone went dead.

Kelly raised an eyebrow at me. “Your office girl?” She smiled at me. By then we were good friends and spent college classes and other time together. Back then I was too shy and stupid and failed to make our pseudo-dating a true relationship. Amazing how first love lingers decades afterward!

I was outside collecting shopping carts, because American laziness never improves, when a massive pick-up truck roared into the parking lot. This truck was the type that consumed a gallons of gas just idling for a minute. I surmised the driver burned through 3 gallons of gasoline just zooming into the parking lot as he did. Of course, I knew that the driver was the loudmouth on the phone. Drivers of those massive trucks usually made some sort of fuss. He hopped down and strode inside. I snatched the shopping cart he narrowly missed and followed him inside. He didn’t look at me.

He stomped up to the customer service desk, leaving clods of dried mud on the floor, and slapped his receipt on the counter. “I’m the man who called. Get Chris, pronto, chicky.”

Kelly had dark eyes. Even from the distance I stood, I could see them darken into two black fireballs. I closed the distance before I had to mop up the customer’s blood and dispose of another body.

“I’m Chris,” I said. “Thank you for bringing that receipt.”

The man jumped. “Da fuck you come from?” People never noticed a clerk unless they had something they wanted.

“Could you refund his dollar, please?” I asked Kelly. “I am sorry that your string cheese didn’t ring properly. We’ve had that problem all day.”

Kelly pursed her lips, took the receipt, and worked the POS while I worked the other POS.

“Women need to be on their knees or in the kitchen,” the man said. “No woman is going to get one over on me. I drove 10 miles back into town.”

“Here’s your dollar.” Kelly pushed the oldest, crustiest bill she had in her register across the counter.

The man snatched the bill and held it up. “Damn straight. No one is going to get one over on me.” He threw his head back and laughed. Then,

he stamped out of the store, flinging more mud clods from his boots as he left.

I held myself together until I heard the truck rev. Then I burst out laughing.

“Is that?” Kelly asked.

“Yes. He drove twenty miles to save a dollar. A truck like that might get ten miles to a gallon at best.”

Kelly’s face brightened. “Gas was \$4 a gallon this morning.”

“That was an expensive dollar.”

Beer, Cigarettes, and Baby Formula

Near the end of the month, I often saw people pay with whatever coins they could dig out of their sofas for the essentials: beer, cigarettes, soda pop. Rolls of pennies weren’t unusual when a nicotine addict was desperate for a fix. Sadly, a certain event would become a norm whenever the month grew too long for mismanaged paychecks.

One afternoon, I stood chained to the register. A woman plonked a 24-pack of beer, a loaf of white-bread, and a canister of powdered baby formula.

“I also need a carton of this-specific-brand-and-number of suicide sticks,” she told me in a deeper voice than I could achieve. Well, at least that was what I heard. I had lost a good number of family members to those death sticks. After three tries of trying to get the right ones—there are too many types of those things—, I rang her through.

After I told her the amount, she stuffed her debit card into the terminal. The system reported back a failure and told me her balance. The old systems would sometimes do that.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “Your card didn’t go through. It tells me you’re \$25 short.”

The woman grimaced. “We will need to put something back then.”

“Okay.” As soon as she spoke, I knew what was going back to the shelf. I pulled the cigarettes, bread, and baby formula out of the bag. “Which do you want to send back?”

She didn’t hesitate. “The baby formula.”

I removed the item from her order and finished the transaction. The first time this happened I surmised she had more formula at home or something. But soon this happened month after month with multiple women. Each time, the baby formula would go back. I guess babies were fine with beer and tobacco, who knew? Sometimes the women would pay out of their bras—sweaty bra money would move even the Fed toward using only coins. It’s amazing how much sweat banknotes can hold. I was surprised when one woman pulled out a plastic Ziploc bag of change from her bra to pay for her beer. Men skipped the baby formula ritual and went straight for the beer and suicide sticks. They paid with sweaty Fruit of the Loom money and handfuls of cup-holder change held together with that month’s Pepsi and Bud Light drippings.

Five Hours of Hell

Someone in the main office had the bright idea to hold five-hour sales every month or so. When you have actually decent sale prices, a limited time frame, and first-of-the-month government payments, you set the stage for profit at the expense of your employee’s sanity. For one of these sales, I had gallon tubes of ice cream on sale for half off. People in my town love their ice cream, to the point where I would see people buy three or more gallons of it every week. I had no illusions about why so many children and parents were overweight. So when I saw this ice cream sale. I ordered 1,500 units. Each unit contains two tubs. Mind you, the town has less than 4,000 people. I ordered heavy so I could sell the remainder of the tubs over the next month at a more-than-nice profit while giving the store manager the option to run in-house sells if he wanted. The ice cream shipped on six wooden pallets. I knew that I wouldn’t be able to keep up with the demand during the five-hour sale. This wasn’t my first rodeo. So, I held back several thermal shipping boxes. These things look like Igloo coolers but are big enough for me to hide in when I needed a break from people. I filled these coolers with towers of ice cream with the idea that I would drop the coolers in the center of the aisle.

On the morning of the sale—I had to be back at the store at 7 AM after closing after 11 PM the previous night, as usual—the store manager saw me drag out one of the coolers.

“What’s this?” he asked.

I had filled my chest freezer display with ice cream the previous night, but it wouldn't be enough. I didn't say anything. I just removed the lid from the pallet-sized cooler. His eyes widened, and he smiled. "I was worried about if you could keep up."

"I was too."

He nodded and left to handle the front lines. He left the backend logistics to me and the other managers.

Zombies movies can't compare to the feeding frenzy of Americans attacking half-price ice cream tubs. People rammed carts into each other and jostled each other. But we are Ohioans, so despite the bumper-cars people would dip their heads, say "Oops", and otherwise be polite about it. A few jerk-offs were around too. Many parents sent their kids diving into the cooler when the cooler ran low. Those kids would then serve up the bottom layer of ice cream to everyone before clambering out with goofy grins on their faces. For my part, I would pull out another full cooler—I wouldn't dare take the ice cream away from the mob without a replacement—and then pick up the near empty one. I hid in the freezer and refilled it from my stacks. Between this, I threw whatever I could into the door display and the chest display.

The aisle overflowed with people, which, to be a bit unfair, only four normal-sized customers standing side by side would've filled the width of the aisle. It wasn't that the aisle was narrow. It was the average customer was that fat on ice cream. I'm not fat shaming nor embellishing at the moment, sadly. The people who mobbed the ice cream were the ones who needed it the least. A few thin teens were in the mix, but for the most part I felt like a heroin dealer. At one point in the sale, the aisle jammed so tight with people and carts that even skinny me couldn't have navigated through it. Of course, I needed to change the floor cooler at that moment. I got the display out of the backroom, stopped and leaned on the pallet jack.

"Hey, is that the ice cream?" an old woman asked me.

"Yeah, help yourself," I said.

More people turned and soon I was mobbed. Once the people cleared out enough for me to shove the ice cream into the aisle, the thermal had sold down by half. Half before I could even get out of the backroom's

double doors. The regular frozen display stood empty, as did the freezer chest.

By then my nerves were frayed and my social anxiety was grabbing my throat (any wonder why retail workers have social anxiety and depression?). “Screw it,” I muttered to myself. I pulled back the empty thermal and dropped it in the center of the backroom. I then pulled out every full thermal I had stashed away and dropped them into the aisle. These made the aisles single file down both sides which some three-gallon-of-ice-cream-a-week customers wouldn’t fit within, but I didn’t care. I couldn’t keep up. I then dragged out an ice cream cart and filled the doors from it, blocking off one more side of the freezers.

People muttered and complained, but I ignored them. By the end of the sale, I had burned through all but fifty cases of ice cream. I hadn’t expected that level of mayhem. The store manager found me in the storage freezer, exhausted, and I still had another three hours to go. I could only dream of lunch or a break on those sale days. OSHA is naive to think their regulations are followed in retail.

“We will use your trick from now on,” he said. From that point on, I would fill the thermal coolers ahead of whatever five-hour ice cream hell the main office dreamed up. Thankfully, I wouldn’t always have to work those sales. More often I would be scheduled to clean up the mess afterward.

Wheelchair Demolition

I heard metal on metal screech. A moment later, a cry for help came from the entrance. I rushed into the foyer to see a small woman keeping the swing-arm door from falling on a man in a powered wheelchair. I hurried over and took weight of the heavy door. The man almost ran my foot over as he backed up. He then zipped past us, almost hitting the wall as he turned the foyer’s right angle. He hit the innermost door, and more metal scraping filled the air. He managed to fit his girth through the door without unhinging that one too.

“Do you have it?” the woman asked me.

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“Do you have it?” the woman asked me.

I nodded. I didn't have it, but I had to. The door weighed at least twice my weight. I managed to force the door back into position. The steel pin had sheered off from the force of the man's collision.

Now it wasn't as if the man was new to his powered wheelchair. He had visited the store for years in that chair with years of collisions. He once struck aisle shelving hard enough to move *half* the aisle. The aisle was well over 40 feet long. Moving the entire shelving unit back into place without losing the products on them was a feat. I still have no idea, decades later, how the man's collision forced the aisle so far. I had hit shelving units with a powered pallet jacket and only shoved a small section of the shelving. The man must have added a nitrous system to that machine. He would buzz down the street on his way home, sometimes passing cars. The pickup drivers wouldn't let him pass them, of course.

As for the door, I had to wedge it open and rely on the door's opening arm to keep it from shearing the top pin too. At the end of my shift, it took the night maintenance guy and myself to close the door enough to lock it. Only then did we see how far the door's steel frame had dented from the collision.

Years later, the man hit the door again, and again sheered the bottom-most pin. Granted, the door did stick out too far. I had bruised myself on that door often enough. When the store finally remodeled, they opted to get rid of the 90 degree turn for a straight-through foyer. Fortunately, the automatic doors were easy enough to put back into their runners when the man smashed into them too.

Shirt, Shoes, Loophole

You might think summer would increase ice cream sales, but you'd be wrong. People ate just as much ice cream during winter, at least in my town, as during the summer. Price, not heat, mattered. But that didn't mean summer heat didn't mean anything. It degraded behavior. Women would hand off sweaty-bra money more often, and people who have no business wearing bikinis, spandex, open shirts, and otherwise showing off their paunches shopped more often. As long they wore something that resembled a top and shoes, all was fine. But the store's policy and health code never mentions bottoms.

I'm sure you can guess where this is going.

I knelt on the floor stocking sugar. Sugar only fit on the shelf if you stacked it in a certain pattern. I had screwed up the pattern, so I didn't notice the man until he was standing over me.

"I'm looking for dried ranch dressing," he said.

I unfolded myself from the shelf and looked up. I immediately regretted it. The man wore a long white shirt which barely reached to his upper thigh. He wore nothing underneath the shirt. Nothing at all. More commando than Rambo. And I saw everything from my angle. I stood up, upsetting my layer of sugar and sending it sliding to the floor. I felt blood run from my eyes from what I had seen.

"I'll show you."

The man followed me with disturbingly wide strides.

Men weren't the only ones who went commando with just a shirt. In one instance, I lay on one the floor trying to fish a customer's car keys from under the gondola. Somehow the old woman had dropped her keys and kicked them under the kick plate that was supposed to have stopped anything from going under the shelving units. Of course it happened to be a section that I couldn't disassemble without taking down half the aisle thanks to how the product was set. I managed to work out the kick plate and was hunting with a tiny flashlight.

"Can you help me find something?" a woman's voice said over me.

I pulled my arm from under the shelving—it came back black with years of crud—and turned my head. The woman stood all-but on me. She

also wore just a shirt. It hang over her ample stomach which hug lower than the shirt. Neither hung far enough, and she was another commando. She gazed down at me, unconcerned about how I could see everything.

“Looks like you need help finding something too,” she said.

I stood up and dusted some of the hungry dust fiends from my arm. “W-what are you looking for?”

Over the years, I learned that while not a regular practice, a surprising number of the public askew underwear. Those that do must have some exhibitionist bent to them. Instead of standing at a normal distance, which would hide their bits or asking a clerk who isn't on the floor, such people seem to seek out people and distances where bits had the risk of being seen. They never show enough where they can be nailed for public indecency. The public itself is indecent with its behavior, dress, scent, and very existence! Okay, okay. Let me be fair. Not *everyone* falls into this category, but a significant percentage of Americans need to never leave their houses until they learned how be behave, dress, and clean themselves. But as I think back to my eye-gouges, the customers were being intentional in exploiting various loopholes. In all the instances too, the people were perhaps near their fifties if not older. Midlife crises manifest in odd ways with the American public.

Mystery Semi Trailer Loot

The owner of the grocery store liked to go to auctions. These weren't your regular auctions. At these, you bid on semi trailers full of mystery products. I never asked what he would pay for one of those trailers, but he selected me to sort through them. He'd treat me to breakfast before I went diving. Those trailers were filthy, and I'd be the first human to enter in years, judging by the layers of dust and dirt that coated everything. At the end of my work shift, my skin would be black with dirt. I blew my nose, and it came out black. When I went home and showered, the bathtub would be streaked black. I probably should've worn a mask, but I was a teenager and didn't think about that sort of thing. But the break in the usual work grind was welcome. The other clerks even felt jealous about how the owner always chose me to dig through the trailers. It wasn't that he favored me or that I was strong. I was the little guy, the

thin shorty, so I could fit into the tangle recesses. Bent display racks, shelving units, and other sheet metal that was only good for scrap were common in those trailers. But profitable treasures also lurked. The owner was older with heart problems and unable to climb inside those trailers. I would drag out the treasures for him to see and price out for sale. Sometimes I would find lots of t-shirts and shorts. Other times I would find health and beauty products. This was before everything had near-dated expiration dates (this was the 1990s, after all), so the fancy French skin products I would dig out of the dirt more than covered the price of the trailer, I was certain. I found stereos and other electronics. The amount of loot I would dig out of the trailers varied. Sometimes, I would dig out an impressive amount; other trailers were mostly mangled shelving units that worth salvaging. In one instance, the store owner had bought three trailers which took me three days to sort through. Most of those were clothing items. These buys were the only times the store sold clothing items.

After I dug out anything of value, the owner and I would use a price-sticker gun to price each item. He kept the prices surprisingly low for the time, such as \$1 t-shirts. He told me he always turned a profit on each semi-trailer auction even though the prices were yard sale level. While we priced, the store manager came up with a customer problem. The customer had mistaken the ending of a weekly sale and complained about it. The owner winked at me.

“Give it to her for that price.”

The store manager froze. “You will lose \$100 on the sale. She has that much product.”

The price-sticker gun snicked in the owner’s hand. “That’s fine. Take care of the customer.”

The store manager left. Then, the store’s owner looked at me. He smiled. “Do you know why I’m taking a loss on that customer?”

I shook my head.

“I will make back that \$100 and more by keeping that customer happy. She will keep spending. It’s the same reason we price these so low. I could price these higher and make more profit, but I want the customers to

keep coming in.” He lifted a shirt. “These cheap items will bring them in and they will buy more while they are here.”

I sneezed a clod of dirt into my elbow crease.

Tornado Shopping

The town’s World War II era air raid siren blared. Outside, the storm raged. Lightning lit up the rust-orange clouds. Wind screamed and swirled. I had just collected shopping carts. I had to chase one of them into the street after she decided to act like a hobo and push the cart toward the squatter house. Overhead, clouds spiraled. I made it back inside the store just as hail started to pelt the few cars remaining in the parking lot. Kelly checked out a panicked woman. The woman’s shoulders may have hunched as the tornado siren started, but that didn’t stop her from unloading her shopping cart. Kelly’s eyes were wide. I helped bag the woman’s groceries and hooked the bags on my arms. Then we rushed out into the hail and rain. The woman peeled off, leaving just one car in the lot.

When I reentered the store, the electricity gave out. Thankfully, the store’s emergency lights retained a battery charge.

“Where do we go?” Kelly asked me. The customer-service desk clerk stood behind her. She also wrung her hands. I wondered that myself. The grocery store was little more than a pole barn with a metal roof. I remained calm. I had grown up in a mobile home, so the risk of blowing away in a tornado was a part of childhood. But I was concerned. Fortunately, I remembered years ago the store manager had mentioned the meat locker would be the best place to shelter from a tornado.

“Let’s go there right now,” Kelly said.

The building shook as the storm slapped it. Rain and hail drummed the roof.

We raced through the darkened store to the meat room. And then I heard it. The squeak of a shopping cart wheel. I then remembered the sedan that remained in the parking lot. Kelly had also froze.

“What is it? We need to hurry. That’s the tornado siren again,” the customer-service desk clerk said.

Kelly looked at me.

“Go inside. I will find the customer.”

“The power is out though,” the desk clerk said. She was still new to retail. Poor summer child.

Kelly offered her a tired smile. “That won’t stop a customer from trying to check out.”

“But... no power.”

A giant slammed the building.

“Go on ahead,” I said. I left them and went to the beer cooler.

As I had expected, I found the man putting a 24-pack of Bud Light into his shopping cart. Mountain Dew, Doritos, and other snacks sat in the cart. The tornado siren blasted again.

“Some storm, huh,” he said.

“Uh, I’m sorry, but we won’t be able to ring you out.” I waved at the emergency lights. “We lost power.”

“I had wondered why it got so dark,” the man said. He laughed. “Wait, your checkouts don’t have battery power?”

“Sorry.” It was a partial lie. One POS had a battery backup, but Kelly wasn’t logged into it that night. Plus, a tornado sighting posed a bit of a problem.

The man sighed. “That sucks. I have a party tomorrow. You can’t...”

I shook my head just as the building shook.

“I guess it can’t be helped. Will you need help putting everything back?”

Oblivious yet one of the nicer customers. The tornado sirens blared long and loud: touchdown sighted.

The man tilted his head. “Oh, that doesn’t sound good. I had better go I guess.” He strolled toward the front. I followed and pulled the powerless automatic door open. Trash flew across the parking lot at head height. Hail broke on the pavement. The man rushed to his sedan. The wind yanked the door open, and he slipped inside. He had to work to get his driver’s door closed. I pulled the door closed and locked it. If I hadn’t locked it, I knew someone would try to come into the store.

I made it to the meat locker and ducked inside just as the height of the storm broke over the store. Kelly sagged with relief as I entered. The

newbie sat on a beef box with her knees drawn up. Both of them had found the flashlights the meat department had kept in the locker for when the electricity went out. We spent an hour in the locker before the siren blasted the all clear.

Endcap Display Hijinks

Soon after I was first hired, the managers put me in charge of building endcap displays each week. Endcaps are the shelving displays at sit at the end of each aisle. They act as high-volume shopping zones for the weekly sale items. Deciding which weekly ad items to place on them influences how high or low each week's sale numbers will be. You want to combine loss leaders, items which do not generate any profit after labor costs are factored in, with higher margin "tie in" items. If bread is on sale, you tie in peanut butter and jelly. There's an art to these types of displays, more than you'd suspect. You want the lowest margin items to be on the top and bottom shelves. People are lazy and don't reach for them. You want the highest margin items to be head and torso height. People shop most frequently from easy-reach shelving. You want kid-targeting products to be on level with the shopping cart children's seats so that children will see the items and pester parents for them. Then there's color considerations. You don't want similarly colored products next to each other. You want to build patterns and cadence with the product colors to attract people's attention and pull them from endcap to endcap. Surprise, humor, and interest can be used as well.

"What's this display?" the store manager asked. He wore a bemused and befuddled expression. The grocery store I used to work had sold to a new owner, and this store manager was brought in. Despite how I was the "old guard," we got along well enough, but we were still getting to know each other.

I smiled. "You don't like it?"

"Prune juice and toilet paper?" The corners of his mouth quirked.

I had built prune juice and toilet paper endcaps and laxative and toilet paper endcaps for years. They performed amusingly well. I smiled at him.

He rolled his eyes. "Take it down."

In another instance, the produce department had a wooden wagon used for displaying items. The deli department often put a refrigerated case next to it. Summer scorched, and watermelons were on sale. The deli department had filled the refrigerated case with cold fried chicken. I filled the wagon with watermelons, and then went hunting for a tie-in product. I settled on grape soda. When the store manager came back from a small vacation, he froze in front of the display. I was busy filling the produce department. The display had sold down quite well. His face flushed as he took in the three items: fried chicken, grape soda, and watermelon. Now, we were in Ohio, but even Ohioans know that there's a bit of a racial element to that combination. For many black communities in the South, such food was a summer-time staple. And it is a good combination! The store manager looked at me, shook his head, and walked away. I grinned. He had gotten used to my screwball displays. They got attention and moved product. That was all that mattered! Chili making displays were fine but dull. I preferred building displays like menstruation products and chocolate or cereal and Lactaid. Unorthodox product combinations like that drew attention, sold well, and amused me. When you work the grind of retail, you have to find small amusements wherever you can.

Birds of a Feather Flock Every Which Way

A woman screamed. Then a men yelled. I saw the robin zip past in a panic. The poor creature soared among the humming fluorescent lights. It dived into the aisles and flew near customers' heads. Birds weren't common in the store. The store had only a single exit, and the strangeness of the modern grocery store confused any unfortunate who entered. Birds included! I fetched a long-handled fishing net we kept for just these instances. Now you can't simply net a bird in a pole-barn store. While the ceiling's height wasn't inordinate, unlike chain grocery stores, it was still too high for netting a scared bird. Catching a bird requires you to exhaust it first. You have to keep the bird flying until it becomes too tired to escape. I spent the next hour, much to the amusement of the customers, keeping the bird flying. Whenever it would settle on the top of an aisle, I would chase it back to flight with the net. An amazing number of people fear birds. We were more concerned about the thing pooping on products. Eventually, the robin tired enough for me to net it. It squawked and

struggled as it took it outside. When I freed it, the poor thing was too exhausted to fly away. Instead, it hopped a short distance away and regarded me with an eye. I shrugged, silently wished it the best, and went back to work. An hour-long break from the grind was always welcome.

The One Left Behind

The two-year-old fidgeted as she watched me load the groceries into the car's trunk. Her mother prattled as she rummaged around in the front seats for something. The fact the two-year-old was quiet pleased me. I never cared for kids, especially the noisy ones. I stuffed the last bag of groceries into the car and closed the trunk.

"Thanks!" the mother said. She shut the driver's door, put the car in gear, and pulled away.

The two-year-old watched her mother pull away with a look of shocked fear. I felt my own jaw drop. The car zipped out of the parking lot and onto the street and was gone.

I looked at the little girl. Her eyes were wide, but she wasn't crying yet. I had no idea who the woman was and had no way to contact her.

I forced a smile at the girl. "You're mom will be back. Let's just wait and see."

Thankfully, the weather cooperated for a change. The sun shined bright without scorching. A cool wind blew. People pulled into the parking lot and back out without even looking in our direction. The minutes ticked by. As they did, the girl became more troubled. Her lower lip quivered, and she kept looking between me and the direction her mother drove. I wasn't sure how much longer she could keep herself together. When children looked at me, they would often start crying. I supposed they sensed my dislike for children or something.

Another five minutes or so passed. I supposed I would have to take the kid inside, notify the police and the store manager, and they could work out the woman's identity from the store's security footage. "We had better take you inside. Your mom will—"

At the moment, tire squeals drew my attention. The mother pulled in beside me and jumped out of the car before it had rocked to a stop.

“I’m so sorry,” she said. She scooped the little girl out of the shopping cart. “I-I don’t know what happened. I thought I had put her into her car seat, but when I got home....” She hugged the girl to her. She stuffed the kid into the car seat, and then pulled away.

Most commonly, I saw people pull away with gallons of milk still on their car roofs. Inertia and friction are surprisingly powerful. When customers pull away, the gallons would remain firm. I had always wondered if the milk made it to the customer’s home or if it flew off at a stoplight. Beer was never forgotten like milk or that little girl were.

Easter Floor Waxing and Beer

Each Easter, several other clerks and I had to work. The night before, we removed all the displays from the floor and a third party came in to strip the old floor wax and put down new. Then on Easter we’d go in and replace all the displays. Floor stripper could burn your nosehairs so soon after a fresh waxing. We unlocked the front automatic door, tugged it open, closed it, and went about our business. We wanted to get the displays done as soon as we could and get back home. Divide and conquer. All of us had to work on Monday.

I wrestled the produce tables out while the other clerks worked elsewhere in the store.

“Hello! Where is everyone?” an unfamiliar voice called.

I popped my head out of the produce prep room. I had a direct line of sight with the registers. A man stood at one of them with a twelve pack of beer on the belt. He gazed around with his brow furrowed.

“How’d he get in?” I asked myself. I was dressed in my street clothes, but people knew me as the ice cream guy no matter where I went. I walked up to him.

“Finally! Did you know something’s wrong with your door?” the man pointed. “I had to force it open.”

The automatic doors stood open. Beyond, a car pulled in and another man got out and started toward the store.

“Sorry, but we’re closed. It’s Easter,” I said.

“If you’re closed, why are you here?”

“We had the floors redone. We’re putting everything back.”

“Can’t you check me out anyway?”

I gestured at the register. “Nothing’s turned on.”

The man followed my gesture. “Oh.” He let out a theatrical sigh. “Oh well, I guess.”

I felt pleased that he wasn’t going to make a fuss. “I’ll close the doors behind you.”

We met the other man on our way out. “Sorry, we’re closed for Easter.”

The man frowned. “I’ve never seen a store close as much as this one.”

I kept my empty, professional smile. The store only closed for Easter and Christmas Day. And the only reason why they closed on Easter was so the floors could be waxed each year. “We will be open again tomorrow.”

“Where I’m I going to get my beer in this town?” the man asked.

“I know right?” the first customer said. “This town is dry on Sundays.”

The two started talking about possible places to buy their beer as they walked into the parking lot. I closed the doors and locked them. From that day onward, we made sure the doors were locked behind us when we worked on Easter.

The Mud Tracker

When I saw the man, I sighed. I had mopped the store early in the vain hope of going home before midnight. The man wasn’t a regular, but I saw him often enough. Mud caked his knee-high boots. His clothes, however, were pristine. He traipsed into the store, casting clods of mud over the still-damp floor. I wondered if the field still had top soil left as dried mud the size of my clenched fist broke off.

Kelly glared at the man as he disappeared into an aisle. She didn’t have to wait for me to finish the floors and help the customer-service desk clerk count down the tills and safe, but she usually did. The desk clerk also gazed darts at the man. I retrieved the broom, dust pan, and pushed my mop bucket over to clean up the field he had tracked in.

The man strolled to Kelly’s line (at least he was fast) with an arm full of Little Debbie boxes. A half-gallon of milk dangled from his little finger.

Kelly didn't disguise her anger. It had been a long day of customer nonsense and entitled neediness.

I had just finished the floors—the man had left boot prints through most of the aisles despite needing to only hit two areas for his purchase—when another mud tracker entered the store. The clock's hand marked the last five minutes of the too-long day. I gripped the mop handle when the mud tracker pulled a shopping cart out of the corral. Two more people slipped into the store before I could lock the door. Each of them also claimed a shopping cart.

We didn't leave the store until after midnight. Yet another typical Saturday night. I had tried.

Impatient Checkout

A line snaked from the only register that still worked. The other cashiers had gone off to handle the assistant store manager's tasks or to stock my frozen food department. I had the POS produce scale on the belt and I worked on its tangle of wires. The assistant manager worked on the register behind me. Across three of the four registers, the produce scales had stopped working. Without the scales, the POS couldn't scan barcodes. We had been shown how to fix this problem by the POS serviceman, but it required time and wire wrangling. The store couldn't be bothered to properly replace its critical system after all.

A third person pushed their shopping cart up and began to unload it. Never mind the hulk of metal, wires, and circuit boards that sat on the register belt.

"Sorry, this register is closed," I said. I fished out a pair of ancient serial communication ports. Finally found it.

"Don't you have another checkout open?" The woman crossed her arms. "I'm in a hurry. I can't wait."

I shook my head. "The only register that still works is that one. I should have this one fixed soon." I yanked the serial ports apart. Next, I had to reboot the computer, which still ran Windows 98—not even the SE version. After that, I reconnected the serials, rebooted again, and prayed the ancient driver would reset. Each reboot took close to ten minutes.

She looked over at the line which now snaked to the ice cream section. “I can’t wait that long.” She frowned. “Fine then.” She stalked off, leaving the cart, and left the store. I shrugged. Unfortunately, the cart prompted people to line up behind it.

“Sorry,” I called out. “This register is broken.”

The people muttered and moved to the assistant manager’s register to be told the same thing. You’d think seeing a mess of ancient technology would tell people something was wrong, but you’d be wrong. Windows booted into the command prompt, and I felt a surge of nostalgia. Command line computing still has advantages. The batch script ran and the checkout system came up with its blue MS-DOS era color scheme. I plugged the serial connector together, and rebooted.

One of the cashiers arrived and took the abandoned cart away. In the checkout line, people stared at me as if they could will me to open another register lane. Behind me, the assistant manager cursed. We were college buddies, but he went into business while I went into computer science. He was decent at technology, but he was also easily stymied.

Windows came back up, but the system failed to detect the scale. I unplugged the serial connectors and started the process again. It was a coin toss according to the technician. After all, critical systems for making money didn’t need to be reliable!

Another person started unloading their cart. I stated my line, and he also abandoned the cart. It took two more tries for the POS to detect the scale. Four times for the POS for my friend worked on, and the final register had completely died.

Midnight Food Stamp Order

I had long since turned the lights out, leaving only the security lights to illuminate the store. I traced the customer’s squeaky shopping cart wheel to the canned food aisle. No doubt the cream corn called. It was, after all, nearing midnight. Kelly worked with me as usual for Saturday night. Her pale skin flushed with rage. And I agreed. We were both entering college midterms and didn’t have time for people’s selfish nonsense. We had better, more pressing things to do. I went over to find the customer before Kelly decided to use plastic bags for their true intended use, the

use that their printed label told despairing parents not to do. I indeed found the customer gazing at the cream corn with a triple-X expression on her face. She wore clown-patterned pajamas. At least she had shoes. Most late-night pajama shoppers wore slippers, including the fluffy puffy kind.

“Can I help you find anything? What do you have left to get?” I asked.

She turned her faraway, Harlequin-romance gaze to me. “No, I’m fine.”

“Well, we are closed and it’s getting close to midnight.” I swept my gaze over her cart. I recognized the usual patterns of products: soda pop, snack cakes, boxed and canned food. Milk. Nothing from the produce department. All of the items processed and unhealthy. “I just want to let you know that our food-stamp processing machine and credit card processing machines turn off in about five minutes. They run an automatic report at midnight. I can’t stop it.”

She put the cream corn into her cart. “That’s fine.”

I narrowed my eyes. Unfortunately, I couldn’t run her out of the store, as much as I wanted to. I returned to Kelly. She didn’t ask me about the customer. She knew I did all I could to get them out at night. We talked about our upcoming exams and tested each other from memory. Might as well use the time constructively.

The woman made it to the register at midnight. I unloaded the cart for her, and Kelly rang her through faster and bagged faster than any competition bagger could’ve managed. We shared a look when the woman pulled out a food stamp card and shoved it into the terminal. Kelly tried to decapitate the woman with her glare.

“I’m sorry, but we can only handle cash now.” I said through clenched teeth. I pointed at the clock. It was ten after midnight. “All the card processors are running their automatic end-of-day reports.”

“I don’t have money,” the woman said.

“There’s nothing we can do,” Kelly said.

The woman sighed, and without a word, walked toward the doors. The overnight floor cleaner was in the foyer and let her out. Kelly quivered with anger for a long moment, then she slammed her fist into the receipt printer. She tore off the resulting strip of paper and scrawled on it.

“We will put it back tomorrow. Go help Sara with the safe,” she said. She handed me her till and took the cart.

We managed to get out of the store before 1 AM thanks to Sara’s money speediness.

Lottery Rigging

I fumbled with the lottery machine’s locks. I had only emptied the machine’s money and refilled its ticket rolls once before. I didn’t notice the man behind me.

“So you’re the one.”

I didn’t startle. I had long since lost that ability. Retail crushed your animalistic survival instincts. Lions had nothing on the American public. Lions, at least, made it quick. I didn’t look at him. “I will be done in a few minutes.”

“Done rigging it, you mean.”

I turned then. The old man glared down at me. His remaining gray hair stuck out as if he had shoved his beak of a nose into a light socket. His eyebrows contained all the hair his crown had lost. “Rigged?”

“I never win here. I win the lottery everywhere else in town but here. You rig this machine. I won \$10 at the Shell station yesterday!”

I felt tempted to ask him how much he had spent to win that \$10. In my business classes we called the lottery a voluntary idiot tax. People would be better off investing their lottery money in certificates of deposit or index exchange-traded funds. But those didn’t have the same rush of emotion the lottery offered, and they took time. We’d see pensioners drop discouraging amounts of their monthly social security payments into the lottery machine at the start of each month.

“I’ve won hundreds of dollars,” the old man continued. “Except here.”

“All I do is put in these rolls of tickets.” I pointed to the tickets and gestured at the empty slots inside the machine. “There’s no way to know what’s in each roll.”

“It’s rigged no matter what you say.”

I shrugged. “I agree with you. That’s why I never play the lottery. I’d rather save or invest that dollar.”

The man fishmouthed. “Well, I’m a winner. You are just unlucky. That’s payback for rigging things so other people lose.”

Praying the Prices Away

When you entered the store, you entered a foyer. Inside that foyer waited the shopping carts and whatever sale displays we set up. Another pair of automatic doors let you into the store. The foyer wasn’t large, especially with the pallets of product we always stuffed into it. I left the freezers to collect carts and thaw a little under the sun. A number of people chattered in the foyer, choking the flow of customers leaving and coming in. So far, so normal. I wrangled the carts and shoved them into the store four at a time. When I entered, the cluster of people had formed a ring around a younger woman. She clasped her hands to her chest in prayer, and he had her eyes closed. The remaining people clasped hands and had their heads bowed. An older man led them in prayer. I had no problems with prayer, as a Christian myself. However, public prayer, especially a prayer ring that blocked all customers going into and leaving a busy grocery store might have been on Jesus’s mind when He told His followers to pray in private.¹ The incoming and outgoing customers and I waited. We were Ohioans, and the Ohioan reputation for saying “Oop” and “Let me squeeze by you” held true. After the prayer, the young woman straightened with a smile on her face. Customers said “Oop” and squeezed by the prayer ring. The young woman then swapped spots with a middle-aged woman. The ring expanded to block traffic again, and another round of prayers issued.

I slipped the shopping carts by the ring and made a racket. Not exactly a Christian thing to do, but then these followers of Jesus weren’t doing what He told them to do anyway. Pharisees by another name in my book. By my third purposefully noisy cart deposit, the prayer ring was giving me dirty looks for ruining their show, but they broke up and allowed customers to squeeze by them. The looks some of them shot me suggested they were going to pray for my soul, which was preferable to being told I was going to hell (judge not, after all) for having to work on Sundays.

¹ You can look it up for yourself: Matthew 6:6. I don’t know about you, but this verse seems pretty clear. Don’t make a show of yourself.

Never mind I had to work because the churchgoers made Sunday one of our most profitable days of the week.

Paying Mary Jane

By the end of the month, plastic Ziploc bags of couch change became the currency of choice. I remained amazed at how couches could yield such consistent currency month after month. Couches could mint enough coin for milk, beer, bread, and the other staples. But that wasn't the only way people attempted to use Ziploc bags to purchase groceries.

I worked the last checkout lane to help cover lunches. While we managers never got our OSHA-required breaks and struggled to take even our lunches, we made certain the cashiers and clerks did. Good managers serve those under them, not the other way around. A twenty-something man came up to the register. He plunked bags of chips, boxes of Mrs. Freshley's snack cakes, and other munchies. Usual end-of-the-month staples. I told him the amount.

He frowned. "Sorry, man. I don't think I have that much." He had a faraway look. I could tell his mental gears were missing cogs and weren't well oiled. I had seen those signals enough in town over the years.

"I know. Could we exchange this for cash, man?" He pulled a Ziploc bag filled with dried green leaves. I'm a imported tea snob. I especially love yokuro tea from Japan. That was not tea.

He leaned in. "I grow it myself. It's top quality."

Marijuana, at that time, was illegal. I glanced around. The customer behind him had a slack-jaw expression as she fiddled with her smartphone.

"Sorry, I can't take that as payment."

"It's good stuff, man. I'm overpaying with it."

"I believe you, but we don't have any way to change it to cash. If I take off some of your items, would you have enough?"

He shoved the bag into his pocket and pulled out his wallet. He leafed through it. "Maybe take the chips off."

\$100 Soda Pop

The customer service desk called me to the front. Sara held one of the keys to the outside pop vending machines. A young man fidgeted at the desk.

“The Coke machine at this man’s money,” Sara said.

“Let’s go take care of it.” I led the man outside to the sole Coke machine.

I unlocked it and opened it. The man peered inside with curiosity. Few people had seen the inside of the machines they used everyday. “Do you know how this works?” I asked him.

He shook his head.

I ran him through the same spiel I would give a new clerk, showing him the mechanisms and how to fill the cans into the machine. I showed him the jam that prevented the machine from giving him the can he had selected. I almost lost my finger to the cylindrical mechanism when I removed the can jamming it. I gave him the can.

“How much did you put into the machine?” I asked him. I opened the door the isolated the bill taking and coin mechanisms.

“A hundred dollars.”

I chuckled, but then I noticed the man’s serious expression. I frowned. “The machine shouldn’t take a bill that large. It doesn’t haven enough change for it. I showed him the depleted change system. “See?”

“Well, I did.”

I removed the box that held the banknotes. And, indeed, on top of the stack was a \$100 bill. I felt my eyes widen. Who put that much into a pop machine? What machine would take it? Obviously, the bill reader wasn’t working right. I handed him the bill. “Here you go. Don’t try to use a pop machine to break this in the future. I’m surprised the machine took it. You can take the pop for your hassle.”

“Thanks, man!”

Smartphone and Gasoline

I keyed the customer's purchase into the gas pump system after doing the math for their discount. The grocery store's loyalty card didn't work with the pump system. The nearby scratchpad teemed with numbers. Through the glass, I watched the woman. She punched the button and her phone stole her attention. In her other hand, the gasoline nozzle stopped short of the car's gas tank opening.

Gasoline began to pool on the ground. She continued to one-hand swipe her phone.

I glanced at the pump notifications. If the system worked properly, I should've been able to stop the gasoline flow. I hit the button. Still the gasoline streamed from the nozzle. I rushed around the counter and outside.

"You're spilling!" Was all I could think to say.

She glanced up from her phone, her gaze distant.

"You're spilling gas!" I said.

She blinked and looked down. With a yelp she released the handle, stopping the flow. Then she shoved the nozzle into her car. She turned to me. "I'm not paying for that." She thrust her chin at the pool. The acrid scent of gasoline infused the air.

There was no way to know how much she had spilled. The system made gasoline refunds a pain. I pursed my lips as I thought. Then I shrugged. "I can refund you half. Will that work?"

She smiled at me and turned back to her phone. I returned inside and issued her refund. She was still fooling with her phone when she came inside to collect and when she pulled away.

I walked past the expensive oil-sopping pads, which didn't work, and into the store to look for clumping cat litter. It worked better than anything for gasoline spills. Her spill took two full bags of litter.

The Parrot

I heard a squawk and looked around. I had the misfortune of being the store's bird wrangler whenever a bird got inside. The tallest guy in the

store was terrified of birds, so might as well make the shortest dude on the staff handle it. Chasing a terrified robin or sparrow with a fishing net was at least an entertaining way to burn an hour. The secret is to keep the bird moving until it's too tired to escape. Then you can net it without a problem. Just in case you ever need to bird wrangle.

I gazed at the ceiling and didn't see anything. Birds tended to panic from all the lights and weirdness that is the modern grocery store (I sympathize). I must have lost my mind, finally, and was hearing things. I never thought I'd see pirates when my mine broke. I had thought I would wheelchair joust in the memory ward, imaging myself as Percival or Arthur. The squawk sounded again.

I frowned. "Why do I hear a parrot?" I shrugged. No point in fretting about my brain breaking. Shopping carts needed herded, so I wandered toward the front. People claim there are just two unavoidable things: death and taxes. These people never worked a grocery store, or they would add "collecting shopping carts" to the list.

An old man stood in line. I heard the squawk. I don't have good stereo hearing, so I can't pinpoint the direction sounds come from, but a flash of green caught my gaze. A green parrot nestled in the man's denim coat. Just its head peered out. The parrot regarded me with a beady eye then it squawked again. I smiled at it and shrugged. My brain hadn't snapped after all—yet. The old man didn't look like a pirate. He was ruddy enough, but no patch or peg leg or puffy shirt. But Ohio wasn't near the ocean, at least not in the state of climate change we were in that year, so I supposed even pirates would dress normally. He even wore pants! So if the old man wanted to bring his parrot in his coat, he was welcome to it. I wasn't going to enforce the no-pet policy with a perhaps pirate. Once I knew the man had a parrot, I never saw him without it. Each time he went into the store, the parrot rode in the man's shirt or coat. The parrot would peer out and then duck its head back to hide. Definitely a retired pirate parrot. I wondered how the old pirate dealt with the inevitable bird poop beyond always wearing a white shirt.

The Old Woman

I watched three customers cover their mouths and dry heave. Another man fled the checkout lane with his jaw locked tight. I wished I could've fled with him. Color seeped from the customer I was ringing out. Her nose wrinkled, and she gagged. Feeling sympathetic—few people had built up resistance as we cashiers have had to build—I rang her through as fast as I could. She ran, actually ran, with her bags in hand out the doors. The automatic doors barely opened in time to avoid her slamming into them.

I glanced back at the line. A wide distance had opened between the next customer and the other people in line. They clapped hands over their mouths and noses. In the next line, I saw Mary, one of our most stalwart cashiers, put the back of her wrist against her green-tinted mouth. I willed myself not to gag as the next customer stepped in front of me. I failed as scent of the old woman wafted at me. Roadkill on a one-hundred degree day would come close to her scent if you added spoiled milk, septic pumpings, the flushings of a preschool hit by a norovirus, and strong cheeses to the roadkill. She smelled like death and rot. Part of me—a distant part of me that day—felt bad for her. I suspected she had an untended colostomy bag or some unhealing wound. She was filthy with unknown-things staining her fingernails. Her oily hair hung in stiff strings. Unmentionables clung to her post-menopause mustache and beard. No homeless person I had met smelled like her. Scent of circumstance differed from the scent of despair. And this scent differed from even despair. And although I had compassion toward her, I also had compassion for all the people her reek was making sick. People have some basic responsibilities toward those around them, such as not stinking so bad that you make people gag. It doesn't matter if you have a medical condition. You have the social responsibility to do what you could not to harm those around you.

The customer behind her retched and ran out of line for the restroom, leaving her cart behind. I rang the old woman through as fast I could. When I took her cash, I resisted the urge to boil my hands immediately. This routine happened whenever she shopped, which was several times a week, because, like so many other people, she only purchased enough

food to last a day or two. The store loved the numbers of people who only bought for that day's meals and then returned the next day. Luckily for the customers, this old woman wasn't the type who bought lunch and dinner each day. I kid you not: you could smell her truck pulling into the parking lot, especially during the summer. While I never confronted her about her reek, the assistant store manager did many times. Nothing changed. Customers began to avoid her, refusing to even queue into a line she stood in. They would hang back until she was on her way out the door. That ought to tell you how bad the air became if people would rather hang well back instead of trying to be next. The store manager failed to get her banned from the store: corporate wouldn't allow it because the store was the only one in town. At a loss for what to do, cashiers and sometimes a stock clerk would follow the woman around with a can of air freshener. Febreze is good, but not that good, sadly. Several fed up cashiers would look the woman in the eyes and spray the freshener. While this was rude, the woman's presence making people retch and run to the restroom to vomit was more unacceptable. The air freshener required large amounts to cover over the reek, but I heard many customers thank the cashiers for the attempt.

Seizing the Day

I worked with the assistant manager on his last night at the store. He was being promoted to store manager for another location. We had gone to college together and were friends. His replacement was also one of our college buddies. I didn't want the position and had turned it down. The position paid more, but it was salary. I preferred getting overtime pay and having the ability to go home, unlike salary. Several times when the store lost electricity, the salaried workers would sleep over in the store to monitor the freezers and guard the safe. No thanks. Anyway, we were chatting and working together when he got a call over the intercom from the deli department. We went back there to see an old woman—not the death-scented woman—having a seizure. Her elderly husband stood there watching her flop on the tile floor. He didn't move to help her. My friend turned the woman on her side, and I retrieved a pillow from the deli for her head. We then called the emergency squad just to make sure she hadn't hit her head on anything. Seizures look scary, but as long as the

person having one doesn't choke or smash their head on something, there's not much to be concerned about. She wasn't vomiting or drooling or anything of that nature. Just another day in the grocery store. The woman had had a seizure before in the store, but it wasn't a regular event.

Fast forward several years later. The replacement assistant manager was working his last night. He was moving on to better pastures than retail. We were chatting and working together when the deli called him over the intercom. We went back there to see the same old woman having a seizure. Again, her husband just watched; he didn't move to help her. Just watching with an empty expression. I'm not sure if the woman had so many seizures that he didn't see a need to react or if maybe he knew she was too hard-headed to get hurt. We did the usual routine, and she came out of the seizure before the emergency squad arrived.

Fast forward again. It was finally my final night at the store, and, you guessed it, a call came from the deli.

"No. It can't be," I said to myself.

Sure enough, when I got back there, the same old lady was on the floor seizing. The same old husband just watched. This time, several people were helping, one of them was a local EMT who happened to be shopping, saving me from having to call him. The universe had an odd way of marking three different departures from the store.

One-Thousand Pounds of Entitlement

One of Ohio's rare snowstorms raged outside. Of course, people had waited until the storm hit to decide they needed sidewalk salt and other supplies. People liked to deny that Ohio could still get snow and ice. I had managed to wrestle the 1,000-pound pallet of salt out of the backroom and into the rear aisle. It had a spot all the way on the other side of the store. At the time I weighed 110 pounds. Once you get momentum on your side, you were fine, but getting that weight moving snaps your back. As usual, I was the only floor person on duty.

A middle-aged woman stood in front of the deli case. She looked right at me as I pulled the mass to momentum. Then she turned back to the deli clerk. The pallet jack thundered on the tile-floor. I got closer. The woman looked at me again. She didn't move.

“I need three pounds of chipped ham,” she said.

She looked at me and didn’t move.

“Excuse me,” I managed to gasp. “I need to get through.”

She didn’t move.

I had a lot of momentum now. The woman was fat and took up a good portion of the runway. That was just a fact. I reversed the jack and shouldered it to stop the pallet from rolling her over. The wheel squished the side of my foot as I forced it to stop. She glanced at me again and sniffed.

“I need a pound a colby,” she said.

I ground my teeth. I was so close to her that she had to have heard it. I almost hadn’t stopped the salt in time. My back also screamed at me. Don’t let retail fool you; it murders your back. I will have back problems for the rest of my life because of the grocery store, as will most everyone who works retail for any length of time. Concrete floors turn your ankles and feet to powder. Add in relentless boxes of product and the permanent understaffing stores practice. Again, OSHA is naive.

After ordering various other things, woman tried to walk around me and the salt, but there wasn’t enough space for her. She gave me a dirty look and walked the long way around. I tugged the jack, but by then I was out of strength. I leaned almost horizontal against the weight to managed to move it just a hair. The old deli clerk offered to help, but I didn’t want her breaking her hip.

“Let me help you with that.” An old man appeared and walked behind the salt. Leave it to the old men to get you out of a jam. Together, we got the salt moving again. Even after we had momentum the old man stayed with me to help me get the pallet in place. We sold through most of the salt that evening.

Mops and Detergent

“A customer broke a bottle of laundry soup,” the new stock clerk told me.

Inwardly I smirked. While it's not kind, it was time for a rite of passage. He had started two weeks ago. "How would you clean it up?" I asked.

"Umm. A mop and water?"

I shrugged. "Go for it." I went back to my work in the freezers. After about ten minutes I emerged to check on the clerk. He was going at the laundry detergent with the mop. With each swipe more detergent smeared and more suds formed. Still, he went at it with determination. I smiled to myself and went back to my tasks.

Another half-hour or so passed when the store manager came up to me. "Why is Mike mopping the same spot. I passed him several times."

"A customer broke a bottle of detergent." I smirked.

The store manager rolled his eyes. He knew the ploy we played. He then shook his head, muttered something untoward about me, and left. I laughed.

If you aren't aware, the best way to clean laundry detergent from a waxed floor is the same method used for vomit, oil, and anything else viscous: clumping cat litter. Regular cat litter works okay too, but clumping absorbs the ooze, allowing you to sweep up the mess with a broom. A little mopping is always required to get the rest, but the litter does most of the work. However, once you take a lot of water to laundry detergent, you're done. The soap suds too much for the litter trick to work. All you can do is keep mopping at it, especially with how sudsy Mike had made the floor by then. At the least, the floor was shiny and spring-time fresh for the rest of that week.

Reefer Madness

The distribution company was kind enough to send a reefer from Indiana across Ohio to the store one fine summer day. No, it's not a large shipment of that type of reefer. The main storage freezer decided to die. Of course, it waited until I had a large inventory of ice cream and other items for a sale. So a helper and I spent the day locked in the storage freezer, loading everything onto wooden pallets to shove into the freezer semi. We shoved the softened ice cream into the nose and stuffed all the rest inside however it would fit. This reefer was frigid, as it should be. But

it also didn't have any lights. Did I mention it was also a "fine" summer day? Make that a "fine" summer week, with temperatures hot enough to soften the parking lot. Many of the large pickup trucks sank into the pavement while their owners went on their Mountain Dew or Bud Light runs. This meant I couldn't leave the door open on the reefer. The truck's compressor blew a constant stream of frigid air from the nose to the rear door. It had enough speed to billow my jacket. So I moved from face-melting heat to Antarctica without a sun. I had only a flashlight and a sidekick. My sidekick and I had worked together for well over a decade at that point. He had my back whenever I needed him. He had a mild cognitive disability that he leveraged to get out of working hard sometimes. Smart man, but it didn't work on me. He armed himself with a flashlight and a far better coat than what I had. By then, I had become immune to the cold. In fact, I preferred frigid temperatures over heat. Still do. I would sweat at 50°F like it was over 100°F. Still do even though I haven't worked in a freezer for well over a decade. So that "fine" summer had made me terribly sick with nosebleeds and heat headaches.

The truck wasn't tall, and we had stuffed it solid. There were no walking spaces. The only way into the nose was up and over the pallets of stock. The gap measured perhaps three-feet high. Did I mention the absolute darkness? The only time I experienced that level of darkness was when I was a mile underground in a cavern system. Anyway, I hoisted myself onto the stock and wormed my way along the boxes using my flashlight to pinpoint where I had put what I needed. Unfortunately, we had to keep most of the sale items near the nose since they were prone to melting. The icy wind blew into my face as I crawled on my belly. Once I found what I needed, I slipped between the pallets until I stood on something and then dug out whatever item a customer desperately needed. With the box in hand, I shoved it toward my helper who waved his flashlight like he was calling down a plane. Afterward, I climbed back up and snaked toward the nose where the ice cream lurked.

The roar of the fans and the below-zero wind hit you full force that close to the blowers. The ice cream had turned into bricks. Using my feeble flashlight to gauge the height, I aimed at my helper's light and flung the ice cream at him. I had warned him before going into the truck that I was going to throw the bricks of ice cream at him. They were too solid to be

hurt by a throw. Still he shouted with surprise as the first brick bounced off the ceiling and ricocheted into his area. I'm not a sports dude, so I couldn't throw for vanilla beans. After a few failed throws, I climbed up and side-armed each ice cream block so it passed through the crawl space. It was then I realized how small and high up that space was. We had stacked the pallets a bit too high. Side-arming was faster, so I pelted my poor helper, until I heard him call out in pain.

"What happened?" I shouted at him over the wind.

"You hit my nose!"

This was the routine for the next several days while the new compressor for the freezer shipped, sans smashing my helper's nose. I offered to do the catching, but he didn't want to climb over everything and through the wind. Again, smart man. As you may have guessed, if you are a horror-film watcher, the flashlights eventually posed a problem. On one stocking run, I reached the nose and was digging through the ice cream when my flashlight went out, plunging me into darkness. As my luck would have it, my helper's flashlight went out too. Either the cheap batteries we used or the cold or both did it. I heard him bang on the flashlight.

"My flashlight went off!" A hint of panic edged his voice.

I blindly hoisted myself up to my crawlspace and groped toward the door. I imagined the stacks giving way under me and plunging me headfirst down to break my neck or suffocate in cases of Cool Whip. When my hand caught air, I knew I had reached the end of the crawl. Just then, my helper's light flashed on, searing my eyes.

Each foray into the reefer took over a half-hour just to collect the items customers wouldn't stop buying. Perhaps the worst part was summer's hand smacking us as we opened the door. We would go from around -30°F to well over 90°F instantaneously. Reefer is bad for you.

Buried in the Back

"Has anyone seen Mike?" the assistant manager asked. "I hadn't seen him in more than an hour."

I hadn't. The store wasn't large, so there were limited places to hide—we all knew them and where the cameras had blind spots. "His car is still out there," I said.

"Maybe he's in the backroom restroom," the assistant manager said.

I followed him to the stock room. The restroom door was closed. He knocked and no response. After knocking and calling again without a response, he pulled the door open. Empty.

Then we heard it. A muffled call. "Help!"

"Did you hear that?" I asked.

The assistant manager nodded. It sounds like it's back here somewhere. "Mike, is that you?"

"I'm here."

We looked around the area. "Where?" the assistant manager asked.

"Back here," I worked my way around the cardboard bailer toward a pile of Juicy Juicy cases that had toppled. Mike gazed out from the mess.

"They fell on me, and I couldn't get out," he said. "I was stacking them up."

"Why did you stack them so high?" the assistant manager asked as we lifted the heavy cases of WIC-approved juice off the hapless clerk.

"I wanted to see how high they would go."

Despite being buried in cases of juice for an hour, Mike had only a few bruises.

Stomach Pump Day

I struggled to stand. My legs wobbled and hunger twisted my stomach. My back spasmed. Mike, a different Mike from the one who was buried in juice, buzzed around with more energy than anyone working over twelve hours had a right to have. We had been working ten to twelve-hour shifts for the last few days, tearing down shelving and rearranging the store for a grand reopening to celebrate the store's remodel. The store's owners demanded we rearrange and fully restock the store in a week. Every hour the store stood closed to the public was an hour of lost sales. Never mind the millions the owners already had in the bank and our too-low wages. Removing all the product, tearing down gondolas, cleaning the decades of

dirt encrusting the floor under them, and rebuilding them in a different position was hard, dirty work. Luckily, a third party merchandiser company was coming in to restock everything.

Mike cracked open a can of Mountain Dew and downed it. His hand shook.

“How many is that now?” I asked. The other clerks all looked at him.

“Number forty-eight unless you count the bottles as two,” he said. His eyes were huge. “Come on, lets get the last of these done.” He ran to where we had dropped the last of the shelving on the floor.

The rest of the clerks and I picked ourselves up and followed him. My arms ached and didn’t want to move right. Mike attacked the last of the shelving with more energy than all of us combined had. Before long we had the last of the aisle in place. Mike, however, had paled.

“I don’t feel well,” he said. “My guts hurt.”

“No duh,” Juice-Mike said. “You drank the entire Mountain Dew factory dry.”

Mike held his stomach and doubled over. “Ugh. I’m going to go home now.”

“Is that a good idea? You should go to the hospital,” Juice-Mike said.

“Naw. I will be fine.” He waved us off and left. We looked at each other and then finished cleaning up before going home too.

The day before the grand reopening, we were all called back in to finish up odds and ends. Mike wasn’t there. When I asked Juice-Mike about it, he laughed.

“He ended up in the hospital to get his stomach pumped. He’s fine, but he is ordered to stay at home and rest. And to lay off the Mountain Dew for awhile.”

Breakfast Anyone?

The man approached the customer service counter with a large paper bag. The office clerk turned to him.

“How can I help—”

The man pulled a plate with half-eaten eggs and bacon from the paper bag. “I was eating breakfast.”

“Uh, I can see that.”

“The bacon isn’t any good.” The man used a fork to move the bacon on the plate. “I brought it so you could try it in case you didn’t believe me.”

The office clerk looked at the man’s serious face. The man turned the fork toward her. Her eyebrows climbed, and she held up her hands.

“That’s okay. I believe you. I will refund your money.”

“What should I do with the bacon?” the man asked. He put his breakfast back into the paper bag.

“Throw it out I guess?” The office clerk handed over the banknotes.

“But that would be a waste.”

The Dumpster Bends for Deli Discards

Each night, the deli threw away everything that was left in the hot case. The food had sat under heat lamps since it was cooked that morning. Mash potatoes became rocks, and cooked broccoli became petrified forests. Depending on who was scheduled, I would have to heft the heavy trash bags into the dumpster without having the bags burst on me. Trust me, day-old, still-hot deli debris covering you didn't make for a good work night. One night, the deli lady called me back. I dragged the heavy trash can out the back door and struggled to lift it. Dumpsters need to be redesigned for short, weak people like me. I finally managed to shoulder the eighty-pounds of heat-lamp leather meatloaf and dumped it.

A human cry came out of the dumpster.

I often saw cats and trash pandas—our name for raccoons—in the dumpster. This wasn't a chitter or a meow. A moment later a tanned face and white beard emerged, capped with a hat that was out of style back in the 1800s. The Amish man and I locked gazes for a moment. His cheeks were sunken, and his eyes bugged out in his deep sockets. The veins of his temple and throat stood out.

"Uh, sorry," I said.

"Was that the deli food?" he asked with his Swartzentruber accent.

"Yeah."

"What was the menu today?"

"Meatloaf I think."

He smiled. "Thank you!" His head disappeared back into the dumpster. I heard him root around and the sound of plastic being crumpled.

No local ordinance or law said you couldn't dumpster dive. Even if one had, I would've looked the other way. The poor man showed signs of starvation. When I offered to buy him something to eat, he turned me down without even popping his head from the dumpster. I would see him several more times over the months and years, but he wasn't the only dumpster diver. Produce castaways proved more popular than deli debris, to the point where people were dumpster diving during the day. When the store manager came across a diver during the afternoon, he asked the police to add the dumpster to their occasional patrol route. I'm not sure how that conversation went: "I need you to patrol our trash." The patrols reduced the number of divers, but I still saw Amish families sometimes. Some parents would lift their kids in and out to do the dirty work. Of course, none of this was safe. We would spear-throw spent fluorescent bulbs into the dumpster. The explosion never got old. So glass and all sorts of other hazards filled that bin. Despite this, I never heard of a diver getting hurt.

Grazers

A half-eaten donut sat on the self beside a half-empty bottle of iced coffee. Further down the aisle, next to the cream corn, sat a half-eaten meatloaf sandwich. I snatched a shopping bag and put the items inside it. In the cereal aisle, I found an empty bag of Doritos. Later, while I stocked the ice cream, I came across a pint of Ben and Jerry's with an odd looking lid. I lifted the lid to find someone had used their fingers to eat out of the pint.

Grazers or browsers, as we call customers who eat without buying, are common in grocery stores. Bakery and deli items appear on shelves throughout the store, either half-eaten or empty altogether. People would tear open packages of fudge, take a bite of a cucumber and put the rest back, and even take swigs out of milk jugs. Of course, this is different from harried parents who've been beaten down by their crying crotch spawn and so open packages. Most of these parents just want their kid to shut up for two seconds and pay for the item with the rest of their

cartload. Smart stores even put out free fruit for these parents and to curb a few of the situational grazers. Grazers, unlike dumpster divers, push up the prices for everyone else. The oddest item I've found was a half-eaten package of raw steak by the baby food. At first, I thought the package had been punctured. After all, I often found thawed frozen items and room temperature raw meat down the inner aisles. It's too much work for people to walk across the (small) store and put the items back into refrigeration. But this package of steak had been torn open instead of the usual kid's fingerhole in the plastic. Teeth marks stood out on the remaining flesh. I knew people liked their steak rare, but this was new even for me. The fact it was left near the baby food wasn't unusual. It was a common place to leave meat, never mind how the meat department stood at the end of that aisle, perhaps a two or three yard walk away.

Grazers frequently took condoms. Most of the time, I'd find a partially empty box by the cream corn and down the cereal aisle. Now I didn't mind this sort of theft as much as even donut theft because it would prevent more mewling crotch spawn. You'd think the "magnum" sizes would be the most commonly stolen, but you'd be wrong. Customers who bought those boxes were proud of it, and always went through the youngest female cashier's line to show off. Most grazers went after the smaller sizes to avoid the shame of the checkout lanes. The second-most stolen item, however, made me feel bad for the people who stole them: tampons. Like condoms and other grazed packages, only a few would be missing out of the box. Considering how expensive period-products are, I couldn't get riled (not that I got riled about much at the store anyway). If stores want to reduce the shrink on these items, and the manufacturer credit system didn't encourage this, lowering prices would go a long way.

The third-most stolen item leads me to another story. One night, I heard a strange rustling sound coming from the Health and Beauty aisle. Thinking it was a grazer after the micro-penis condoms again, I peered around the corner. In the center of the aisle's floor sat a guy in a black mini-skirt. He had an open package of panty hose and was shoving his thick calf into it. Living in a small, rural town, I recognized the man, even if I didn't know his name. He met my gaze and froze. I came out from around the endcap.

"Those are on sale. We just don't have a sign up for them yet," I said.

"Uh, thank you?" He returned to stuffing his legs into the pantyhose.

A bit later, he went to Kelly's register. Kelly looked him up and down, smiled, and scanned the empty pantyhose package.

After he left, I said to her, "He's a brave man in this town."

"Yeah, but he really needs to be careful of pantyhose runs."

Popped and Loaded

Mike wasn't the only one who drank too much soda pop. Each month when, as the benefit was called back then, food stamps were issued to people, the store saw a surge in soda pop buying. People bought cartloads of the main food groups: Pepsi, Coke, and Mountain Dew—but not Sprite or Mellow Yellow or other posing-as-water drinks—on their food stamps. On one occasion a large man waddled behind his overfilled cart of soda pop and passed a well-dressed, higher income man. The higher income man grimaced at me.

"That's what my taxes are subsidizing?"

I shrugged. I was just glad I didn't have to carry out that load. One of my peeves was when an able-bodied man asked me to take out his load of sugary drinks and stuff his pickup truck with them. Although I was also peeved I would have to later fetch the fat soda-pop guy's cart, but then, as I watched the higher-income guy push his cart out while muttering to himself, I would have to gather his cart too. The immigrants rarely left the carts in the lot. They even pushed them back into the cart line when they brought them in. Just the native-born Americans would leave their carts every which way. Sometimes they would leave the Pepsi or whatever boxes in the cart after emptying the cans into a cooler. Now, many would say that I was being paid to gather carts and clean up things. To a degree, sure. But social responsibility used to be a thing too. Looking out for others and "do unto others as you want done to you" used to be bedrock values, but I had learned not to expect much beyond selfishness from the American public, especially when the first of the month hit.

I always wondered how much of these pop-carts were being sold off for cash. Food stamps didn't buy the other staples: beer and cigarettes and lottery tickets. Most of the pop-cart people only appeared at the beginning of the month, each and every month. Was it possible to live

only a Pepsi and Mountain Dew? I never resolved this question in all my years working grocery stores.

The First of the Month

The first-of-the-month saw every manner of customer, from the kindly old grandmother, to the harried mother, to the tight-knit and kind family. But it also dragged out the entitled, the weird, the people who stood on your foot and shouted at you, the people who had no business leaving their house until they learn how to be civil (most would starve to death first). It took the rest of the month to put the store back together after the first of each month. People would spend all their benefits and then spend the rest of the month using literal pennies to buy food. Month-after-month this cycled until benefits began to be staggered across various weeks, to the relief of those of us who worked. My fourteen day stretches normalized to a five or six-day work week. I had just finished my second bachelor degree and was beginning my masters degree, so the days off work helped. However, the staggered release schedule kept the weirdos coming in throughout out the month instead of all at once. The cream corn area went from a once-a-month love hotel to a full-on red-light district.

The sixty to eighty-year old children were one of the most common events during those first-of-the-month years. They would tottle in looking for an obscure item that we would inevitably had sold out of or no longer stock. All these old ladies moved in the same way. First, they would quiver, and their lower lips would protrude into a pout. Their brows lowered. Then, their arms would cross. Finally, their right foot (rarely the left foot for some reason) would stomp down.

“Well, you should have it! You know I come in every month for it.” Each would shout, or something to that effect. “Order it for me.”

While we were a small-town store, we couldn't possibly know *everything* particular people bought. Obscure items that mostly went out of date would be dropped from our catalog, which is when these old women wanted them. Whenever their old husbands were with them, the husbands would glance at me with a long-suffering, apologetic expression. When the first-of-the-month payments shifted across the

month, these sorts of tantrums also shifted across the month instead of concentrating into the first week. The change of payment distribution eased some stresses on us retail workers. It spread the American public's nonsense across the month instead of concentrating it. I never decided if that was for the better or not. While concentrating the bad behavior made for a hell-week, the rest of the month become relatively calmer because people had no money and so stayed away. With the all-month distribution, we had to deal with the same people all month long without a break. The pickup drivers were always all month, so no changes there. The shift in benefit government pay distribution acted like a bag with eggs on the bottom, cans of cream corn dropped on top the eggs, and a pristine cinnamon roll gently laid on top.

Library Stories

You'd think after working with the public as I had, I would try to get away from people. Ah, but you forget my brain had been broken! I earned a Masters in Library Science and soon entered the library world. Library patrons are far easier than the retail crowd. My nonsense scale had been so jaded and skewed that what would be an 8 out of ten for my library boss wouldn't even be a 1 on my scale. Of course, this caused a bit of trouble between us because events never registered high enough on my scale for me to report, while those events would be flagged as dire on his, amusingly for me, innocent trouble scale. Most library problems revolve around bodily fluids and scents. Some problems never end with the American public, but in the library world they aren't anywhere near as frequent. Libraries deal with the homeless and their scent and antics. Most homeless I dealt with were fine. They would do what I asked, and I tried to be understanding for their plight. So, I don't have anywhere near as many stories from my librarian years. Libraries are boring in that regard. Library patrons are nice. Not to say most retail customers aren't nice too, but everyone has to eat. Libraries stand as optional. Libraries also police more than retail does because libraries don't have the profit motive, and allowing nitwits to disrupt the library too much hurts the

ability of the library to uphold its funding. However, for these events, my experience with the American public helped.

The Book with the Red Cover and that Guy

In the library you find a cliché. Like most clichés and stereotypes, it comes from actual events. One day, a patron hunted me down. People often hunted me down since I could usually find the book they wanted or other bit of information. Librarians are information detectives.

“I’m looking for a book,” he said.

“Maybe I can track it down,” I said. “Do you remember the title or author or anything else about the book?”

The man stroked his beard. “I read it decades ago. I remember the book had a red cover. It had a guy on the cover.”

Two dozen book covers flashed through my mind. “Do you remember anything else about it? Was it a mystery?”

“I don’t remember. It was red and had a man on the cover.” He frowned as he thought.

I didn’t know the patron, but I noted the beard, his tucked-in collared shirt and his voice inflections. “Let’s go take a look.” I led him to the Western section. I remembered a Craig Johnson book with a cover similar to his description. The book wasn’t decades old, but I knew from my (true) decades of working with the public that hyperbole was the norm. I pulled the book from the shelf and showed him the cover. “Was it this one?”

“Yes!” He snatched the book from me. “How did you know?”

I shrugged. “Just a lucky guess. I get it wrong more often than not, especially with young adult books and romances. They all have the same types of covers.” Just earlier that day, I had failed to help a teen track down a book she wanted based on her “it was a green book with flowers and big letters” description. She remembered nothing else about the book.

Feral in the Library

Libraries didn't have cream corn to act as an aphrodisiac, but that didn't mean people didn't get hot and bothered in the library. Teens hadn't yet discovered the power of those golden kernels nestled in artificially flavored, salty cream sauce. Thankfully so. I had to review enough security footage that left me wondering if the police would pick me up for watching minor-content. Grinding to an ending, heavy petting, tonsil diving, and all the other antics I saw adults doing in the grocery store happened in the library too. Only by teens and, yes, even tweens. We'd notify their parents and ban them from the library, but that didn't fix the problem. It was a "not in my backyard" response so we didn't have to deal with it. I'm climbing onto my soapbox, so if you don't like opinionated takes, move to the next section.

Libraries act as free babysitting services, which leaves them in troubling positions. A significant number of American children are feral. They lack the necessary levels of parental supervision and guidance. Parents have to work too much in order to match financial ends. Librarians and teachers deal with feral children every day, to the point where little surprises. Teens grinding on each other *because* the cameras can see them. Tweens backbiting each other online and offline. Librarians and teachers can only do so much to ease these problems. My spicy take: parents need to parent or not have kids. If you don't raise your kids, what's the point of having them in the first place? Harsh, but after a quarter a century of working with the American public, I will tell you, you do not want your children to be raised by unmitigated American culture. Feral children become rabid, selfish, and self-destructive adults.

The Library Drug Dealer

Grocery stores aren't the only place where drug deals go down. Library parking lots offer the safety of security cameras, just in case a dealer or customer needs to make a dispute to corporate. Most drive-thru pick ups take place during the day. If the Friends of the Library would've sold munchies to go with the weed, DVD checkouts, and other drugs, imagine how much more DVDs the library could buy! Unfortunately, the library

drug dealer wasn't the same dealer who helped me around the store late at night.

Every so often a Ziploc bag of marijuana or a mysterious white powder (definitely baking soda) would appear in the restrooms. Behind the toilet is a favorite hiding spot. For the more sanitary inclined, you can pick up your order in books and DVDs. James Patterson's Alex Cross series was popular for Mary Jane. You can find "scarface" (bath salts if you are lucky enough not to deal with sidewalk pharmaculture) in Armitage Trail's book *Scarface*. Most of the time, librarians will catch these drops when the books and DVDs are returned. Libraries appreciate the donations! Libraries have to pay for the summer babysitting—reading, the kids come in to read—program somehow.

Book Drop Trash Can

A rare snow drifted in the air. Rare compared to my childhood. I wrestled the book cart over the sidewalk to the sheet-metal book drop. After I nearly snapped the key off in the frozen lock, I yanked the door open. On top a few frigid books sat a crumpled fast food bag. The bag of partially eaten fast food dripped what smelled like Cherry Pepsi when I two-finger lifted it. The Cherry Pepsi had soaked and frozen over the few books people had returned overnight. Fast food was the most common item I've found in the overnight book and media drops. Most of the time, it would leak and ruin some of the books. There was no way to know who had mistaken the night drop as a trash can, even if you reviewed the outside cameras because of the camera angle. Libraries usually starve for space for new materials, so at least Pepsi-ice offered a good reason to get rid of old books. I had also found children's toys, bags of drugs, patron mail, prescriptions, dirty diapers, smartphones, and risqué photographs (used as bookmarks if you are wondering). I suppose a book drop looks like a drive-up trashcan. When I worked at the grocery store I had found all the same things, including the dirty diapers and risqué photographs (yes, Luddites still print those type of photographs), on shelves. So, I guess I can't be too harsh on book drop trash.

Sitting on the Dark Side of the Moon

The circulation staff glanced at me with concern knitting their brows. Although I worked in the back, I had seen the man and his posse enter. I noticed how wild-eyed he looked. Their conversation had gotten loud enough to force me to act. Libraries had long ago given up on silence. When I approached the group, I recognized a high-school classmate. I addressed him with my usual "Please tone it down a bit."

The wild-eyed ringleader looked at me. "I have a message from God."

Ah, one of those ones, I thought. Again, everyone had to eat, so I had run into my share of wannabe prophets and messiahs. I smiled. "What did he have to say?"

The wannabe prophet stood up. His disciples did the same. They regarded him with reverence when he spoke. "God transported me to the dark side of the moon and sat down to talk with me."

Yep, one of those. Blood vessels stood out across the whites of his eyes. "It's a nice day outside. Tell me what God had to say. I could use a little sun," I said.

The man smiled wider. "It's all about love and peace, man." He put his arm around my shoulder. I don't like to be touched, but that allowed me to move him toward the door. The circulation staff watched me with wide eyes. I smiled at them and nodded. It's fine. I've got it.

"God's upset with us for all our war and killing," the man said.

"I don't blame him here," I said. "I get tired of all the guns and violence too."

"We forget how to love, man. I'm so glad you understand."

We made it outside. The man's disciples had followed us out. "Thank you for doing God's good work," I said.

The man toothed an even wider smile. I hadn't thought such a wide smile was possible. "He just wants all of us to listen to each other and love each other." He nodded sagely.

"I agree with you," I said. "We all need to love each other more."

He released my shoulders and shot me a double peace sign. "You get it, man! I'm so happy you do. Love and peace!"

I knew my smile was weak, but I gave him a peace sign. "Love and peace."

The man and his disciples walked away.

When I returned inside, the circulation staff flocked me to see if I was fine. I shrugged. I hadn't been worried--more annoyed than anything. The situation wasn't even a one on my scale because the man, as high as he was, wasn't yet belligerent. But he could've turned that way, I was sure, if he wasn't handled properly. Most people just want to be heard.

Shower or No Computer Time for You

While his scent didn't make people retch, Jon stank. As a NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training), Jon spent his day playing browser games in the library. He made no effort to learn how to make those games or otherwise improve himself. Day after day he would wander around town and play on the library's computers. But he also didn't shower. His hair slicked with oil and his body odor would linger for hours after he left. If you've ever gone to a nerd convention, like an anime convention, or to a game store, you've encountered the aroma. There's something about anime, comic books, Magic: the Gathering, and similar interests that attract young men who are hygienically challenged. The library had a policy against offensive smells. I only enforced the policy when many people complained. Unlike some librarians, I don't view library access as a privilege. I consider it a right: a right to a safe space, access to computers, and access to information.

One day, enough patrons complained about his reek and avoided the computers that I decided to act. I bent close to him. He was ripe that day. "Hey, man. I hate to do this, but you need to go take a shower. If you don't I won't be able to let you play on the computers."

Jon peeled his gaze from the screen. "I hate showers."

I blinked at his whiny tone. While I consider myself a geek, I can't understand why NEETs and other geeks don't like to be clean. "It only takes five or ten minutes," I said.

"I don't want to take the time. I have better things to do." He clicked the LEGO figure-esque avatar.

"Sorry, man. You will either shower, or you can't come back until you do. I'm ending your computer time for now, but if you go home and clean up, you can come right back." Library degrees don't teach you how to have these sorts of awkward conversation. They should.

He didn't say anything and return to his game. I went to the circulation desk and ended his computer time as I said I would. He left without looking at me. About a half hour later he returned, except instead of showering he fell back to what such geeks consider the alternative to soap and water: Axe body spray. Sorry, boys. Your funk overpowers even Axe.

"Can I have a computer pass?" Jon asked me.

"You didn't shower."

His eyes narrowed at me, and then he looked away.

"Axe doesn't cut it, Jon," I said. "Get a shower."

He muttered something and left. The next day he had showered. For awhile, he kept up his hygiene, but over time he slipped back into his fetid ways. I would then have to talk with him again and block him from the computers until he cleaned up.

The Playboy Question

Libraries don't allow pornography, even though they do allow raunchy, pornographic romance novels. My mechanic worked on my car when this topic came up.

"Say, I have a question about libraries."

"What's that?" I asked.

"My wife reads those girly porno books. Have you ever read those?"

Actually, I had read a few out of curiosity. "Yeah, they can be pretty graphic."

"Library's don't allow Playboys right?"

"Yeah."

"Why not? There's no difference." His smile was self-satisfied.

"You have a good point." I thought a moment. "It mainly has to do with pictures versus reading. Romance books have to be read and imagined.

Playboy's photos are more immediate. A kid is more likely to see them than read a book."

He frowned. "It's still the same. Those novels are probably worse."

I agreed with him. "Japanese comics have the same problem with some of their drawings."

"Those are weird," he said. "My granddaughter loves those books. Well, if libraries are supposed to be neutral as you've said before, they should either get rid of those smut books or bring in the Playboys!" He laughed.

Questionable Fluids

Speaking of books, library books often have questionable fluids and smears on them. I would tell myself that the brown smudge was chocolate because *no one* takes library books with them while doing their toilet business. Romance books have the most questionable smudges and stains than any other genre. One of the most interesting instances of fluids however, came from a donation.

The woman staggered in, and a headache immediately slammed me. I'm allergic to alcohol, so allergic that I can't smell it without developing a migraine or breaking out in hives. I blame the hot summer day I had to unload a beer semi at the grocery store. Years of broken and leaked beer and wine coated the interior. The day was oppressively hot, and by the end of the it, I was desperately sick. Ever since then just entering a restaurant that serves alcohol, even if I'm not aware of it, triggers an axe-to-the-skull migraine. Even beer on someone's breath will trigger a nasty headache and hives. Well, this woman was beyond drunk. She slapped a sodden book on the counter.

"I want to donate this book. It doesn't do me any good," she slurred.

I forced a smile. "Thank you." I grabbed the book, the Alcoholics Anonymous Bible, before it could pool. The book had turned into sponge smelling of beer.

"You're welcome." She beamed at me and staggered out of the library. She lived across the street, so I wasn't worried about her driving or anything.

I dumped the book into the trash, but the damage to me had already been done. My hands swelled and hives popped out up both my arms. An axe would've been preferable to the headache that hit me. Unfortunately, the library was skeleton-staffed, so I had a long afternoon counting down the hours until I could go home and sit in the dark.

And Not to Forget the Good

Now, all I've done is rant and point out the bad things the American public does. It's my hope that if you are one of the people who does some of these selfish, thoughtless actions, you will stop. Retail workers have a hard enough job without people adding to the mess. However, most people are fine. They either stay out of the way or they do positive things. A quirk of our human minds involves ignoring the good. After all, good things can't hurt us, so there's no need to guard against them. Bad things, like people leaving their carts strewn about a parking lot can put clerks in danger as they collect them. I had almost gotten hit by a car countless times, and not because I wasn't paying attention. But good acts need to be sung too. So here's just a few.

The Stand-up Drug Dealer

Beyond helping me collect shopping carts late at night, the local drug dealer also backed me up one night. While he may have been helping me out so I didn't draw attention to his business deals, I still appreciated his help in this situation. One of the pick-up truck country boys pulled into the parking lot.

"There you are, fucker," he shouted at me.

I tilted my head. I had a pile of shopping carts folded together ahead of me. "Can I help you?" I didn't feel threatened...more resigned to my fate at that point in my retail career.

"You shorted me when you checked me out."

I hadn't been on checkout that day, but one of the customer service clerks was often confused with me. He stood about the same height and had glasses. That was enough to confuse most people, never mind he had

blonde hair and a mustache while I had brown and was clean-shaven. Twins!

"I'm sorry. If you brought your receipt we could--"

"I didn't keep no fucking receipt. You bastards always short me."

Now that I had a chance to watch the man, I could tell he was hyped up on something. At the time meth was the drug of choice. He had some of the tell-tale picks on his face. He took a step toward me.

"Back off, buddy," a man said to my right.

The drug dealer walked from his car. I was so used to seeing him that I had forgotten he was there. He dressed well with a clean sports jersey with a pristine cap sitting low on his head. I couldn't tell you what sport the jersey and cap were from.

"This isn't your business," the angry man said.

"Don't go fucking with a man just doing his job," the drug dealer said. He had a presence that made the angry man step back. The drug dealer was a tall dude.

"They stole—"

"Keep your receipt next time. If they fucked up and you have your receipt, this guy," the drug dealer jerked a thumb at me, "will make sure it gets fixed. He's done that for me several times."

"I..." the man deflated. Then he muttered something, turned, and returned to his truck. He peeled off with screaming tires.

I smiled at the drug dealer. "Thanks for that."

He grinned at me. "Any time!"

The Wheelchair Helper

Beyond the drug dealer, I had many geezers help me. There seemed to be an inverse relationship to mobility and helpfulness. Old men leaning on canes would often herd shopping carts on their way inside. Snatching a single cart, I could understand. Shopping carts can act as walkers, but many of these old men would gather three or four as they toddled inside. These guys would then push their cart back in and hobble back to their car.

One rainy day, I had lost track of time amid my freezer stocking mayhem. I was resetting the freezer case's layout, which was something I enjoyed doing. But four hours had passed since I had last done a shopping cart check. When I realized this, I raced outside. In four hours, the entire fleet of shopping carts could've been strewn about the parking lot and neighboring road. When I popped outside, I saw about half the shopping carts. A man, hunched against the rain, strolled past me and smirked.

"You have a lot of carts to bring in, don't ya?" He laughed and rushed inside.

Across the lot, I saw a man in a wheelchair. He wore a raincoat with its hood up.

He was shoving shopping carts together. I dashed over to him.

"I can get those," I said. "But thank you."

"You're welcome, but don't worry about it. I got this set. You go get the rest." He smiled at me. Rain dripped from his nose.

I wasn't sure how he could shove four carts using his wheelchair, but I felt grateful for his help. As I gathered the rest, he pushed the carts across the parking lot by wedging the base bar against his feet and muscling forward. He got the carts to the incline leading inside at the same time I did.

"Sorry, I can't push that many up the ramp," he said.

"No, it's okay. I just appreciate your help!"

He grinned and whirled his wheelchair around. "I'll go get the other sets."

"You don't have—"

He was already gone. at a loss, I pushed my set of carts inside and then his set. By then the man who had smirked at me came outside. Without a glance, he cursed about the rain and went to his car. I saw him glance at my helper as he drove off. The wheelchair man and I managed to get all the carts out of the lot in record time. I couldn't thank him enough, but he waved me off.

"Happy to help!"

Carryout Anyone?

When I first started in grocery, I bagged orders and lugged them out. Each autumn, out-of-state hunters would rent cabins in the area and deer hunt. Most were from upstate New York and other areas.

"You guys offer carryout?" the hunter asked. His buddies looked at each other.

"Yeah, I can take it out for you," I said. "I have to collect shopping carts anyway."

"Sounds good, my man."

I followed them to their pickup. He dropped the tailgate, and I unloaded the cart into it. The hunter and his friends looked uncomfortable. Finally, the friends each grabbed a paper bag and put it into the bed.

"Don't want to be completely useless," one of them said and laughed.

"Here you go." The hunter pushed a \$20 bill at me.

I held up my palm. "Thanks, but we aren't allowed to take tips. Against the rules."

"Seriously?" He made a face. He folded the bill and slip it into my dress-shirt pocket. "There, you didn't take it." He smiled at me and then they squeezed into the pickup.

In another occasion, I carried out for a middle-aged mother. She had her hands full with a mewling toddler. At least the kid wasn't vomiting, so that was fine by me, but the mother looked on her last nerve. She stuffed the toddler into her car while I loaded her sedan's trunk. When I finished she came around.

"Thank you so much. He's...so much a handful." She pressed her lips together. "I didn't want to be a mother." She pushed a \$5 bill at me.

"Sorry, I can't—"

"Just take it. Thank you. Seriously." She shoved the bill into my front pocket.

Now you have to watch the old ladies with their tips. If you refuse them, they will shove their dollars into your front pocket too, but they liked to go deep and add an extra pat on the pocket and a wink. The

deeper they went, the larger the tip was. Never as much as the hunters, but as a high-school student saving for college, I would take every extra dollar I could snag. Many of these old ladies like to buy candy bars as a tip instead of giving money. Of course, back then candy bars were less than a \$1, but free candy bars were always welcome!

Paper or Plastic? Do I Have to Ask?

Retail workers have to put up with a lot. While there are many good people out there and many more neutral people, there are a depressing number of Americans who suck. Talk to any retail worker, and you have hear war stories covering the gamut of selfishness and stupidity and weirdness. These American customers feel as if they can get away with anything just because they have money in their wallets. Sadly, they think correctly. While stores have customer conduct policies, these policies are just lip service. Profit matters above all else. Unless a customer steals or punches a worker (sometimes not even then!), their terrible behavior goes challenged. I don't know, if all stores refused to take the money of abusive, selfish people, starvation would make them behave civilly pretty quickly! Companies would argue that policing people's behavior isn't their responsibility. However, being a member of society involves following certain rules and standards of behavior. These rules and standards are pretty low-bar: be relatively clean, be civil, be polite, wear pants. Don't be self-centered. Perhaps I should expand on the idea of politeness and civility. In my time as a retail worker, I had learned many people didn't understand those words. In short: Don't talk loud and move out of the way if you are going to talk with someone you meet. Don't get randy with the cream corn. Just buy it and take it to the privacy of your home. If you or your kid is sick, stay home. Explode in your own bathroom. Don't graze. Keep your hands to yourself. Learn to read signs.

And return your damn cart.

My Books

Kanzashi

Hotaru

Tamamo

Tales from Old Japan: Folktales and Legends from the Land of the Rising Sun.

Come and Sleep: The Folklore of the Japanese Fox

Under the Cherry Blossoms: An Introduction To Japanese Tree Folklore

Tanuki: The Folklore of Japan's Trickster