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PART-TIME JOB OR HELL-DOG IN DISGUISE

by Christine Ambrose

I've spent an average of 20 hours per week--more on school breaks--in the same crevice from hell for just over two years now. What do I mean by "the crevice from hell?" I mean the second flight of right-hand side of the escalator at J.C. Penney's Longridge Mall: the bedding and bath department. I work there.

Actually, it's not really that bad. Although there are moments. I'm just getting sick and tired of neatly folding and stacking towels into their cubes only to watch some old lady unfold and stuff them back as soon as I'm finished. This procedure also occurs with area rugs, bath mats, etc. All for $4.45 an hour. Sometimes, when I'm feeling kind of nasty, I attempt to remedy this problem by following directly behind (and hopefully annoying) the customer and fixing whatever he or she unfixes. I have to be careful when I do this, though. If a manager ever caught me doing this, I could get into big trouble.

You see, here at Penney's the policy is simple: kiss the customer's butt!-(smooch)--no matter how conniving, vicious, weird, or revolting he or she may be. For instance, on more than one occasion I've had to handle the return of a used toilet seat. Yuck! I've also had to handle returns of used blankets and shower curtains. This is really disgusting, believe me.

Penney's security actually caught a man shoplifting a toilet seat once. I find it hard to see the logic in this stunt. First of all, it's kind of tough to conceal something as big as a toilet seat under your coat or up your sleeve or whatever. Secondly, the thing was marked down to $9.99. Is it really worth risking arrest over smuggling a clearance toilet seat worth $9.99? Can you imagine the conversation this guy must have had in the clink afterward?

Fellow inmate: "Hey man, whadya get busted for?"

Toilet seat smuggler: "Aah, I lifted a toilet seat."

Another problem with working at J.C. Penney is dealing with "bitchy" customers. But I've devised a unique way to cope with this job hindrance. It happened one day when I was helping this woman pick out a set of "River Canyon" towels. "River Canyon" is a southwestern-looking print towel that takes forever to fold so that it looks just right in the cube. Now, every "River Canyon" towel is slightly different than the rest, kind of on the theme of Cabbage Patch dolls. One towel might have a little more blue color to it, the next, more green. You get the picture. Well, this woman wanted EXACT matches, and she made me go to the stockroom 50 million times to get a perfect set. Then, of course, she proceeded to unfold, rumple, and basically mangle each and every towel, AND she had the nerve, the gall, to ask me if I could "please go get her a fresh one!"

At this point, I was only half-listening to what she was saying. Instead, I was imagining my fist making contact with her cheekbone: POW! I envision the expression on her face as the glasses go flying off. This puts me in a better mood, and I am ready to help the next customer.

The clincher of this J.C. Penney working experience would have to be the weirdos I am forced to wait on. These are the type of people who tell me the details of their intimate and personal lives while I'm standing there, ringing up their bed and bath supplies. One conversation I had with a middle-aged woman went like this (no kidding!):

She says: "I'm buying these towels for a family friend. He's single, you know. Do you believe I had to get two different colored wash cloths because he won't wash his face with the same cloth he washes his "hoo-haah" with?"

I say: "Oh."

Way back in 1987, during the first month I worked there, there in that cornerstone of hell known as the J.C. Penney bedding and bath department, I remember I was crouched in a corner straightening a sheet display where no one could see me. A woman, oblivious to my presence, walked by softly singing to herself:

"There's more for your life at Sears!"

Maybe she's right.

"And no two are ever the same..."

Mom's words echoed in my ear and I watched the wet snow fall on my new black books. The drone of voices lulled me back to my childhood where everything began. She was always herself and I was always herself's sister. She got the top bunk and top grades and high-class friends. Her smile was so bright in her prom photo with the captain of the football team. My smile was so fake as I posed with a "friend of the family." I was always the dandellion next to the rose, until she pricked herself with her own thorns for reasons I'll never know. She sat so pretty on her Cover Girl pedestal. But now I stand six feet above the Sleeping Beauty, and still they are bringing her flowers...

Edie Torre
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