Chapter 16_Case Study—"Working at Walmart" Barbara Ehrenreich

It's Saturday and the time has come to leave my free lodgings and neurotic avian roommate. A few hours before my hosts are scheduled to return, I pack up and head down to Twin Lakes, where—no big surprise—I find out that all the second-story rooms have been taken. The particular room I'd requested, which looks out on a backyard instead of a parking lot, is now occupied by a woman with a child, the owner tells me, and he is good enough to feel uncomfortable about asking them to move to a smaller one. So I decide that this is my out and call another weekly rental place on my list, the Clearview Inn (not its real name) which has two big advantages: it's about a twenty-minute drive from my Wal-Mart as opposed to at least forty-five in the case of Twin Lakes, and the weekly rate is $245, compared to $295. This is still scandalously high, higher in fact than my after tax weekly pay will amount to. But in our latest conversation Hildy has promised to rent me a room with a kitchenette by the end of next week, and I am confident I can get a weekend job at the supermarket I applied to, in bakery if I am lucky.

To say that some place is the worst motel in the country is, of course, to set oneself up for considerable challenge.[1] I have encountered plenty of contenders in my own travels—the one in Cleveland that turned into a brothel at night, the one in Butte where the window looked out into another room. Still, the Clearview Inn leaves the competition in the dust. I slide $255 in cash (the extra $10 is for telephone service) under the glass window that separates me from the young East Indian owner—East Indians seem to have a lock on the midwestern motel business—and am taken by his wife to a room memorable only for its overwhelming stench of mold. I don't have enough Claritin-D for this situation, a point I have to make by holding my nose, since her English

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[1]I may have to withdraw my claim. Until it was closed for fire code violations in 1997, the Parkway Motel in southern Maryland boasted exposed electrical wires, holes in room doors, and raw sewage on bathroom floors. But if price is entered into the competition, the Clearview Inn may still win, since the Parkway was charging only $20 a day at the time (Todd Shields, "Charles Cracks Down on Dilapidated Motels," *Washington Post*, April 20, 1997).

does not extend to the concept of allergy. Air freshener? she suggests when she catches my meaning. Incense? There is a better room, her husband says when

we return to the office, but— and here he fixes me with a narrow-eyed stare—I'd better not "trash" it. I attempt a reassuring chuckle, but the warning rankles me for days: have I been fooling myself all these years, thinking I look like a mature and sober person when in fact anyone can see I'm a vandal?

Room 133 contains a bed, a chair, a chest of drawers, and a TV fastened to the wall. I plead for and get a lamp to supplement the single overhead bulb. Instead of the mold smell, I now breathe a mixture of fresh paint and what I eventually identify as mouse droppings. But the real problems are all window and door-related: the single small window has no screen, and the room has no AC or fan. The curtain is transparently thin; the door has no bolt. Without a screen, the window should be sensibly closed at night, meaning no air, unless I'm willing to take my chances with the bugs and the neighbors. Who are the neighbors? The motel forms a toilet-seat shape around the parking lot, and I can see an inexplicable collection. A woman with a baby in her arms leans in the doorway of one room. Two bunches of teenagers, one group black and the other white, seem to share adjoining rooms. There are several unencumbered men of various ages, including an older white man in work clothes whose bumper sticker says "Don't steal, the government hates competition"—as if the income tax were the only thing keeping him from living at the Embassy Suites right now. When it gets dark I go outside and look through my curtain, and yes, you can see pretty much everything, at least in silhouette. I eat the deli food I've brought with me from a Minneapolis supermarket and go to bed with my clothes on, but not to sleep.

I am not a congenitally fearful person, for which you can blame or credit my mother, who never got around to alerting me to any special vulnerabilities that went with being a girl. Only when I got to college did I begin to grasp what rape involves and discover that my custom of exploring strange cities alone, on foot, day or night, looked more reckless to others than eccentric. I had no misgivings about the trailer park in Key West or the motel in Maine, but the trailer's door had a bolt, and both had effective shades and screens. Here, only the stuffiness of the air with window shut reminds me that I'm really indoors; otherwise I'm pretty much open to anyone's view or to anything that might drift in from the highway, and I wouldn't want to depend on my hosts for help. I think of wearing earplugs to block out the TV sounds from the next room and my sleep mask to cut the light from the Dr Pepper sign on the pop machine in the parking lot. Then I decide it's smarter to keep all senses on ready alert. I sleep and wake up, sleep and wake up again, listen to the cars coming and going watch the silhouettes move past my window.

Sometime around four in the morning it dawns on me that it's not just that I'm a wimp. Poor women—perhaps especially single ones and even those who are just temporarily living among the poor for whatever reason—really do have more to fear than women who have houses with double locks and alarm systems and

husbands or dogs. I must have know this theoretically or at least heard it stated, but now for the first time the lesson takes hold.

So this is the home from which I go forth on Monday to begin my life as a Wal-Martian. After the rigors of orientation, I am expecting a highly structured welcome, perhaps a ceremonial donning of my bright blue Wal-Mart vest and a forty-five-minute training on the operation of the vending machines in the break room. But when I arrive in the morning for the ten-to-six shift, no one seems to be expecting me. I'm in "soft-lines," which has a wonderful, sinuous sound to it, but I have no idea what it means. Someone in personnel tells me I'm in ladies wear (a division of softlines, I learn) and sends me to the counter next to the fitting rooms, where I am passed around from one person to the next—finally ending up with Ellie, whose lack of a vest signals that she is management. She sets me to work "zoning" the Bobbie Brooks knit summer dresses, a task that could serve as an IQ test for the severely cognitively challenged. First the dresses must be

grouped by color—olive, peach, or lavender, in this case—then by decorative pattern—the leafy design on the bodice, the single flower, or the grouped flowers—and within each pattern by size. When I am finished, though hardly exhausted by the effort, I meet Melissa, who is, with only a couple of weeks on the job, pretty much my equivalent. She asks me to help her consolidate the Kathie Lee knit dresses so the Kathie Lee silky ones can take their place at the "image," the high traffic corner area. I learn, in a couple of hours of scattered exchanges, that Melissa was a waitress before this job, that her husband works in construction and her children are grown. There have been some disorganized patches in her life—an out of wedlock child, a problem with alcohol and drugs—but that's all over now that she has given her life to Christ.

Our job, it emerges in fragments throughout the day, is to keep ladies' wear "shoppable." Sure, we help customers (who are increasingly called "guests" here as well), if they want any help. At first I go around practicing the "aggressive hospitality" demanded by our training videos: as soon as anyone comes within ten feet of a sales associate, that associate is supposed to smile warmly and offer assistance. But I never see a more experienced associate doing this— first, because the customers are often annoyed to have their shopping dazes interrupted and, second, because we have far more pressing things to do. In ladies' wear, the big task, which has no real equivalent in, say, housewares or lawn and garden, is to put away the "returns"—clothes that have been tried on and rejected or, more rarely, purchased and then returned to the store. There are also the many items that have been scattered by customers, dropped on the floor, removed from their hangers and strewn over the racks, or secreted in locations far from their natural homes. Each of these items, too, must be returned to the precise place, matched by color, pattern, price and size. Any leftover time is to be

devoted to zoning. When I relate this to Caroline on the phone, she commiserates, “Ugh, a no-brainer.”

But no job is as easy as it looks to the uninitiated. I have to put clothes away—the question is, Where? Much of my first few days is devoted to trying to memorize the layout of ladies’ wear, one thousand (two thousand?) square feet of space bordered by men’s wear, children’s wear, greeting cards, and underwear. Standing at the fitting rooms and facing toward the main store entrance, we are looking directly at the tentlike, utilitarian plus sizes, also known as “woman” sizes. These are flanked on the left by our dressiest and costliest line (going up to $29 and change), the all-polyester Kathie Lee collection, suitable for dates and subprofessional levels of office work. Moving clockwise, we encounter the determinedly sexless Russ and Bobbie Brooks lines, seemingly aimed at pudgy fourth-grade teachers with important barbecues to attend. Then, after the sturdy White Stag, come the breezy, revealing Faded Glory, No Boundaries, and Jordache collections, designed for the younger and thinner crowd. Tucked throughout are nests of the lesser brands, such as Athletic Works, Basic Equipment, and the whimsical Looney Tunes, Pooh, and Mickey lines, generally decorated with images of the eponymous characters. Within each brand name area, there are of course dozens of items, even dozens of each kind of item. This summer, for example, pants may be capri, classic, clam-digger, boot, or flood, depending on their length and cut, and I’m probably leaving a few categories out. So my characteristic stance is one of rotating slowly on one foot, eyes wide, garment in hand, asking myself, “Where have I seen the $9.96 Athletic Works knit overalls?” or similar query. Inevitably there are mystery items requiring extra time and inquiry: clothes that have wandered over from girls’ or men’s, clearanced items whose tags haven’t been changed to reflect their new prices, the occasional one-of-a-kind.

Then, when I have the layout memorized, it suddenly changes. On my third morning I find, after a few futile searches, that the Russ shirt-and-short combinations have edged Kathie Lee out of her image. When I groaningly accuse Ellie of trying to trick me into thinking I’m getting Alzheimer’s, she’s genuinely apologetic, explaining that the average customer shops the store

three times a week, so you need to have the element of surprise. Besides, the layout is about the only thing she *can* control, since the clothes and at least the starting prices are all determined by the home office in Arkansas. So as fast as I can memorize, she furiously rearranges.

My first response to the work is disappointment and a kind of sexist contempt. I could have been in plumbing, mastering the vocabulary of valves, dangling tools from my belt, joshing around with Steve and Walt, and instead the mission of the

moment is to return a pink bikini top to its place on the Bermuda swimwear rack. Nothing is heavy or, as far as I can see, very urgent. No one will go hungry or die or be hurt if I screw up; in fact, how would anyone ever know if I screwed up, given the customers' constant depredations? I feel oppressed, too, by the mandatory gentility of Wal-Mart culture. This is ladies' and we are all "ladies" here, forbidden, by storewide rule, to raise our voice or cuss. Give me a few weeks of this and I'll femme out entirely, my stride will be reduced to a mince, I'll start tucking my head down to one side.

My job is not, however, as genteel as it first appears, thanks to the sheer volume of clothing in motion. At Wal-Mart, as opposed to say Lord & Taylor, customers shop with the supermarket-style shopping carts, which they can fill to the brim before proceeding to the fitting room. There the rejected items, which are about 90 percent of try-ons, are folded and put on hangers by whoever is staffing the fitting room, then placed in fresh shopping carts for Melissa and me. So this is how we measure our workload—in carts. When I get in, Melissa, whose shift begins earlier than mine, will tell me how things have been going—"Can you believe, eight carts this morning!"—and how many carts are awaiting me. At first a cart takes me an average of forty-five minutes and there may still be three or four mystery items left at the bottom. I get this down to half an hour, and still the carts keep coming.

Most of the time, the work requires minimal human interaction, of either the collegial or the supervisory sort, largely because it is so self-defining. I arrive at the start of a shift or the end of a break, assess the damage wrought by the guests in my absence, count the full carts that await me, and plunge in. I could be a deaf mute as far as most of this goes, and despite all the orientation directives to smile and exude personal warmth, autism might be a definite advantage. Sometimes, if things are slow, Melissa and I will invent a task we can do together—zoning swimsuits, for example, a nightmarish tangle of straps—and giggle, she in her Christian way, me from a more feminist perspective, about the useless little see-through wraps meant to accompany the more revealing among them. Or sometimes Ellie will give me something special to do, like putting all the Basic Equipment T-shirts on hangers, because things on hangers sell faster, and then arranging them neatly on racks. I like Ellie. Gray-faced and fiftyish, she must be the apotheosis of "servant leadership" or, in more secular terms, the vaunted "feminine" style of management. She says "please" and "thank you"; she doesn't order, she asks. Not so, though, with young Howard—*assistant manager* Howard, as he is uniformly called—who rules over all of softlines, including infant's, children's, men's accessories, and underwear. On my first day, I am called off the floor to an associates' meeting, where he spends ten minutes taking attendance, fixing each of us with his unnerving Tom Cruise-style smile, in which the brows come together as the corners of the mouth turn up, then reveals (where have I heard this before?) his "pet peeve": associates standing around talking to one another, which is, of course, a prime example of time theft.

A few days into my career at Wal-Mart, I return home to the Clearview to find the door to my room open and the motel owner waiting outside. There's been a "problem"—the sewage has backed up and is all over the floor, though fortunately my suitcase is OK. I am to move into room 127, which will be better because it has a screen. But the screen turns out to be in tatters, not even fastened at the bottom, just clapping uselessly in the breeze. I ask for a real screen, and he tells me he doesn't have any that fit. I ask for a fan and he doesn't have any that work. I ask why—I

mean, this is supposedly a working motel—and he rolls his eyes, apparently indicating my fellow residents: "I could tell you stories . . ."

So I lug my possessions down to 127 and start trying to reconstruct my little domestic life. Since I don't have a kitchen, I have what I call my food bag, a supermarket bag containing my tea bags, a few pieces of fruit, various condiment packets salvaged from fast-food places, and a half dozen string cheeses, which their labels say are supposed to be refrigerated but I figure are safe in their plastic wraps. I have my laptop computer, the essential link to my normal profession, and it has become a matter of increasing concern. I figure it's the costliest portable item in the entire Clearview Inn, so I hesitate to leave it in my room for the nine or so hours while I'm away at work. During the first couple of days at Wal-Mart, the weather was cool and I kept it in the trunk of my car. But now, with the temperature rising to the nineties at midday, I worry that it'll cook in the trunk. More to the point at the moment is the state of my clothing, most of which is now residing in the other brown paper bag, the one that serves as a hamper. My khakis have a day or two left in them and two clean T-shirts remain until the next trip to a Laundromat, but a question has been raised about the T-shirts. That afternoon Alyssa, one of my co-orientees, now in sporting goods, had come by ladies' to inquire about a polo shirt that had been clearanced at $7. Was there any chance it might fall still further? Of course I had no idea—Ellie decides about clearancing—but why was Alyssa so fixated on this particular shirt? Because one of the rules is that our shirts have to have collars, so they had to be polos, not tees. Somehow I'd missed this during orientation, and now I'm wondering how long I have before my stark-naked neck catches Howard's attention. At $7 an hour, a $7 shirt is just not going to make it to my shopping list.

Now it's after seven and time to resume my daily routine at the evening food-gathering phase. The town of Clearview presents only two low-priced options (there are no high-priced options) to its kitchenless residents—a Chinese all-you-can-eat buffet or Kentucky Fried Chicken—each with its own entertainment possibilities. If I eat out at the buffet I can watch the large Mexican families or the even larger, in total body mass terms, families of Minnesota Anglos. If I eat KFC in my room, I can watch TV on one of the half dozen available channels. The

latter option seems somehow less lonely, especially if I can find one of my favorite programs—*Titus* or *Third Rock from the Sun*. Eating is tricky without a table. I put the food on the chest of drawers and place a plastic supermarket bag over my lap, since spills are hard to avoid when you eat on a slant and spills mean time and money at the Laundromat. Tonight I find the new sensation, *Survivor*, on CBS where "real people" are struggling to light a fire on their desert island. Who are these nutcases who would volunteer for an artificially daunting situation in order to entertain millions of strangers with their half-assed efforts to survive? Then I remember who I am and why I am here.

Dinner over, I put the remains in the plastic bag that served as a tablecloth and tie it up tightly to discourage the flies that have free access to my essentially screenless abode. I do my evening things—writing in my journal and reading a novel—then turn out the lights and sit for a while by the open door for some air. The two African American men who live in the room next door have theirs open too, and since it's sometimes open in the daytime as well, I've noticed that their room, like mine, has only one bed. This is no gay tryst, though, because they seem to take turns in the bed, one sleeping in the room and the other one napping in their van outside. I shut the door, put the window down, and undress in the dark so I can't be seen through the window. I still haven't found out much about my fellow Clearview dwellers—it's bad enough being a woman alone, especially a woman rich enough to have a bed of her own, without being nosy on top of that. As far as I can tell, the place isn't a nest of drug dealers and prostitutes; these are just working

worried me at first seem to have mother figures attached to them, probably single mothers I hadn't seen before because they were at work.

Finally I lie down and breathe against the weight of unmoving air on my chest. I wake up a few hours later to hear a sound not generated by anyone's TV: a woman's clear alto singing two lines of the world's saddest song, lyrics undecipherable, to the accompaniment of trucks on the highway.

Morning begins with a trip, by car, to the Holiday gas station's convenience store, where I buy a pop container full of ice and a packet of two hard-boiled eggs. The ice, a commodity unavailable at the motel, is for iced tea, which I brew by letting tea bags soak in a plastic cup of water overnight. After breakfast I tidy up my room, make the bed, wiping the sink with a wad of toilet paper, and taking the garbage out to the Dumpster. True, the owner's wife (or maybe she's the co-owner) goes around from room to room every morning with a cleaning cart, but her efforts show signs of deep depression or perhaps attention deficit disorder. Usually she remembers to replace the thin little towels, which, even when clean, contain embedded hairs and smell like cooking grease, but there's nothing else,

except maybe an abandoned rag or bottle of air freshener, to suggest that she's been through on her rounds. I picture an ad for a "traditional-minded, hardworking wife," a wedding in her Natal village, then—plop—she's in Clearview, Minnesota, with an Indian American husband who may not even speak her language, thousands of miles from family, a temple, a sari shop.[2] So I clean up myself, then do my hair with enough bobby pins to last though the shift, and head off for work. The idea is to make myself look like someone who spent the night in a regular home with kitchen and washer and dryer, not like someone who's borderline homeless.

The other point of my domestic rituals and arrangements is to get through the time when I can't be at work, when it would look weird to be hanging around in the Wal-Mart parking lot or break room. Because home life is more stressful than I consciously acknowledged, and I would be dreading my upcoming day off if I weren't confident of spending it on the move to better quarters at the Hopkins Park Plaza. Little nervous symptoms have arisen. Sometimes I get a tummy ache after breakfast, which makes lunch dicey, and there's no way to get through the shift without at least one major refueling. More disturbing is the new habit of plucking away at my shirt or my khakis with whichever hand can be freed up for the task. I have to stop this. My maternal grandmother, who still lives on, in a fashion, at the age of a hundred and one, was a perfect model of stoicism, but she used to pick at her face and her wrist, creating dark red circular sores, and claimed not to know she was doing it. Maybe it's an inherited twitch and I will soon be moving on from fabric to flesh.

I arrive at work full of bounce, pausing at the fitting room to jolly up the lady on duty—usually the bossy, self-satisfied Rhoda—because the fitting room lady bears the same kind of relation to me as a cook to a server: she can screw me up if she wants, giving me carts contaminated with foreign, nonladies' items and items not properly folded or hangered. "Here I am," I announce grandiosely, spreading out my arms. "The day can begin!" For this I get a wrinkled nose from Rhoda and a one-sided grin from Lynne, the gaunt blonde who's working bras. I search out Ellie, whom I find shooting out new labels from the pricing gun, and ask if there's anything special I need to be doing. No, just whatever needs to be done. Next I find Melissa to get a report on the cartage so far. Today she seems embarrassed when she sees me: "I probably shouldn't have done this and you're going to think it's really silly . . . " but she'd brought me a sandwich for lunch. This

[2] I thank Sona Pai, an Indian American graduate student in literary nonfiction at the University of Oregon, for giving me a glimpse into the Indian American motel-operating community and the lives of immigrant wives.

is because I'd told her I was living in a motel almost entirely on fast-food, and she felt sorry for me. Now I'm embarrassed, and beyond that overwhelmed to discover a covert stream of generosity running counter to the dominant corporate miserliness. Melissa probably wouldn't think of herself as poor, but I know she calculates in very small units of currency, twice reminding me, for example, that you can get sixty-eight cents off the specials at the Radio Grill every Tuesday, so a sandwich is something to consider. I set off with my cart, muttering contentedly, "Bobbie Brooks turquoise elastic-waist shorts" and "Faded Glory V-neck red tank top."

Then, in my second week, two things change. My shift changes from 10:00–6:00 to 2:00–11:00, the so-called closing shift, although the store remains open 24/7. No one tells me this; I find it out by studying the schedules that are posted, under glass, on the wall outside the break room. Now I have nine hours instead of eight, I have a net half an hour a day more on my feet. My two fifteen-minute breaks, which seemed almost superfluous on the 10:00–6:00 shift, now become a matter of urgent calculation. Do I take both before dinner, which is usually around 7:30, leaving an unbroken two-and-a-half hour stretch when I'm weariest, between 8:30 and 11:00? Or do I try to go two and a half hours without a break in the afternoon, followed by a nearly three-hour marathon before I can get away for dinner? Then there's the question of how to make the best use of a fifteen-minute break when you have three or more urgent, simultaneous needs—to pee, to drink something, to get outside the neon and into the natural light, and most of all, to sit down. I save about a minute by engaging in a little time theft and stopping at the rest room before I punch out of the break (and, yes, we do have to punch out even for breaks, so there's no padding them with a few stolen minutes). From the time clock it's a seventy-five second walk to the store exit; if I stop at the Radio Grill, I could end up wasting a full four minutes waiting in line, not to mention the fifty nine cents for a small-sized iced tea. So if I treat myself to an outing in the tiny fenced-off area beside the store, the only place where employees are allowed to smoke, and get about nine minutes off my feet.

The other thing that happens is that the post-Memorial Day weekend lull definitely comes to an end. Now there are always a dozen or more shoppers rooting around in ladies', reinforced in the evening by a wave of multigenerational gangs—Grandma, Mom, a baby in the shopping cart, and a gaggle of sullen children in tow. New tasks arise, such as bunching up the carts left behind by customers and steering them to their place in the front of the store every half hour or so. Now I am picking up not only dropped clothes but all the odd items customers carry off from foreign departments and decide to leave with us in ladies'—pillows, upholstery hooks, Pokémon cards, earrings, sunglasses, stuffed animals, even a package of cinnamon buns. And always there are the returns, augmented now by the huge volume of items that have been tossed on the floor or carried fecklessly to inappropriate sites. Sometimes I am lucky to achieve a steady state between replacing the returns and picking up items strewn on the

racks and the floor. If I pick up misplaced items as quickly as I replace the returns, my cart never empties and things back up dangerously at the fitting room, where Rhoda or her nighttime replacement is likely to hiss: "You've got three cars waiting, Barb. What's the *problem*?" Think Sisyphus here or the sorcerer's apprentice.

Still, for the first half of my shift, I am the very picture of good-natured helpfulness, fascinated by the multiethnic array of our shoppers—Middle Eastern, Asian, African American, Russian, former Yugoslavian, old-fashioned Minnesota white—and calmly accepting of the second law of thermodynamics, the one that says that entropy always wins. Amazingly, I get praised by Isabelle, the thin little seventyish lady who seems to be Ellie's adjutant: I am doing "wonderfully," she tells me, and—even better—am "great to work with." I prance from rack to rack, I preen. But then, somewhere around 6:00 or 7:00, when the desire to sit down becomes a serious craving, a Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde transformation sets in. I cannot ignore the fact that it's the

customers' sloppiness and idle whims that make me bend and crouch and run. They are the shoppers, I am the antishopper, whose goal is to make it look as if they'd never been in the store. At this point, "aggressive hospitality" gives way to aggressive hostility. Their carts bang into mine, their children run amok. Once I stand and watch helplessly while some rug rat pulls everything he can reach off the racks, and the thought that abortion is wasted on the unborn must show on my face, because his mother finally tells him to stop.

I even start hating the customers for extraneous reasons, such as, in the case of the native Caucasians, their size. I don't mean just bellies and butts, but huge bulges in completely exotic locations, like the backs of their neck and the knees. This summer, Wendy's, where I often buy lunch, has introduced the verb *biggiesize*, as in "Would you like to biggiesize that combo?" meaning double the fries and pop, and something like biggiesizing seems to have happened to the female guest population. All right, everyone knows that midwesterners, and especially those in the lower middle class, are tragically burdened by the residues of decades of potato chips and French toast sticks, and I probably shouldn't even bring this up. In my early-shift, Dr. Jekyll form, I feel sorry for the obese, who must choose from among our hideous woman-size offerings, our drawstring shorts, and huge horizontally striped tees, which are obviously designed to mock them. But compassion fades as the shift wears on. Those of us who work in ladies' are for obvious reason a pretty lean lot—probably, by Minnesota standards, candidates for emergency IV nutritional supplementation—and we live with the fear of being crushed by some wide-body as she hurtles through the narrow passage from Faded Glory to woman size, lost in fantasies involving svelte Kathie Lee sheaths.

It's the clothes I relate to, though, not the customers. And now a funny thing happens to me here on my new shift: I start thinking they're mine, not mine to take home and wear, because I have no such designs on them, just mine to organize and rule over. Same with ladies' wear as a whole. After 6:00, when Melissa and Ellie go home, and especially after 9:00, when Isabelle leaves, I start to *own* the place. Out of the way, Sam, this is Bar-Mart now. I patrol the perimeter with my cart, darting in to pick up misplaced and fallen items, making everything look spiffy from the outside. I don't fondle the clothes, the way customers do; I slap them into place, commanding them to hang straight, at attention, or lie subdued on the shelves in perfect order. In this frame of mind, the last thing I want to see is a customer riffling around, disturbing the place. In fact, I hate the idea of things being sold—uprooted from their natural homes, whisked off to some closet that's in God-knows-what state of disorder. I want ladies' wear sealed off in a plastic bubble and trucked away to some place of safety, some museum of retail history.

One night I come back bone-tired from my last break and am distressed to find a new person, an Asian American or possibly Hispanic woman who can't be more than four and a half feet tall, folding T-shirts in the White Stag area, *my* White Stag area. It's already been a vexing evening. Earlier, when I'd returned from dinner, the evening fitting room lady upbraided me for being late—which I actually wasn't—and said that if Howard knew, he probably wouldn't yell at me this time because I'm still pretty new, but if it happened again. . . . And I'd snapped back that I could care less if Howard yelled at me, which is a difficult sentiment to fully convey without access to the forbidden four-letter words. So I'm a little wary with this intruder in White Stag and, sure enough, after our minimal introductions, she turns on me.

"Did you put anything away here today?" she demands.

"Well, yes, sure." In fact I've put something away everywhere today, as I do on every other day.

"Because this is not in the right place. See the fabric—it's different," and she thrusts the errant item up toward my chest.

True, I can see that this olive green shirt is slightly ribbed while the others are smooth. "You've got to put them in their right places," she continues. "Are you checking the UPC numbers?"

Of course I am not checking the ten or more digit UPC numbers, which lied just under the bar codes—nobody does. What does she think this is, the National Academy of Sciences? I'm not sure what kind of deference, if any, is due here: Is she my supervisor now? Or are we involved in some kind of test to see who will

dominate the 9:00–11:00 time period? But I don't care, she's pissing me off, messing with my stuff. So I say, only without the numerals or the forbidden curse word that (1) plenty of other people work here during the day, not to mention all the customers coming through, so why is she blaming me? (2) it's after 10:00 and I've got another cart full of returns to go, and wouldn't it make more sense if we both worked on the carts, instead of zoning the goddamn T-shirts?

To which she responds huffily, "I don't do returns. My job is to fold."

A few minutes later I see why she doesn't do returns—she can't reach the racks. In fact, she has to use a ladder to get to the higher shelves. And you know what I feel when I see the poor little mite pushing that ladder around? A surge of evil mirth. I peer around from where I am working in Jordache, hoping to see her go splat.

I leave that night shaken by my response to the intruder. If she's a supervisor, I could be written up for what I said, but even worse is what I thought. Am I turning mean here, and is that a normal response to the end of a nine-hour shift? There was another outbreak of mental wickedness that night. I'd gone back to the counter by the fitting room to pick up the next cart full of returns and found the guy who answers the phone at the counter at night, a pensive young fellow in a wheelchair, staring into space, looking even sadder than usual. And my uncensored thought was, At least you get to sit down.

This is not me, at least not any version of me I'd like to spend much time with, just as my tiny coworker is probably not usually a bitch. She's someone who works all night and naps during the day when her baby does, I find out later, along with the information that she's not anyone's supervisor and is in fact subject to constant criticism by Isabelle when the two overlap. What I have to face is that "Barb," the name on my ID tag, is not exactly the same person as Barbara. "Barb" is what I was called as a child, and still am by my siblings, and I sense that at some level I'm regressing. Take away the career and the higher education, and maybe what you're left with is this original Barb, the one who might have ended up working at Wal-Mart for real if her father hadn't managed to climb out of the mines. So it's interesting, and more than a little disturbing, to see how Barb turned out—that she's meaner and slyer than I am, more cherishing of grudges, and not quite as smart as I'd hoped.