

## SUPERMARKET WOES

It was five twenty-five, and the family supermarket was about to close. I had been corralled ten minutes earlier by my wife Janice to help her with some last minute shopping. As I trailed behind her after getting out of the car, I was still immersed in writing a letter of complaint to the medical superintendent about the disgusting lack of cleanliness in the ward over the last month.

As we approached the doors of the shop, I mumbled hopefully, “They are half shut to discourage new customers.”

“They are half open, aren’t they?” Janice snapped back.

So I trailed, you might sense, reluctantly. Add truculently, and you would be spot on. This particular supermarket where Janice liked to shop was one of the last ones still in private hands, not having yielded to one of the large chains. Yet something had soured lately, because Janice, I noted shopped at K Mart last time.

We were inside now, and the owner of the store approached us. We had known him as Mr Fred over the years, though his name was Fred Entwhistle. He was an elderly but robust man, with a paunch that he carried with dignity. He had a *bonhomie* about him, which even if seductive for business, I appreciated. The owner of K Mart would not have approached us; he would not be in the store. And he would not smile at us, even with a forced smile.

“Hello, Janice. We are closing in two minutes,” he said cheerily, casting an eye at the trolley. It contained only a carton of milk.

Janice spun around and glared. I had an urge to make a quick exit before the closing bell would ring any second now.

“Mr Entwhistle, I have been coming here for fifteen years. I have appreciated the atmosphere in your store, and been prepared to pay higher prices for it.” Mr Entwhistle’s smile turned to hurt and alarm. “But to tell you the truth,” my indomitable wife continued, “I am considering taking my custom elsewhere, because the attitude,” she stressed the last word, “in this place has changed.”

“But dear lady, I have only pointed out to you that you came in late, and that the store would close soon.”

“In the past you have given ten minutes grace to customers. That is the difference between a private store and a chain store. It is friendlier, more considerate. I could have finished my shopping with my husband’s help (she looked at me sternly, and I nodded) in that time. But actually I came late, because I was not going to come at all, but only decided to come in the last minute.”

“Why were you not going to come at all?”

“Because I have never been so upset in a store before as in this one.”

“Upset? By whom? How? When? Please, you must tell me.”

“If you must know, that gentleman there has upset me the last few times.” Janice pointed to a young man in a business suit.

“What happened?” asked Fred Entwhistle.

“One time when I asked him where a certain cereal had been moved to, he said that you did not run that line. I knew that he was wrong, and when I found the cereal I pointed it out to him. He just muttered something under his breath. He certainly did not

apologise. The next time I was going to ask him something he turned his back and moved away. The last time, when I queried the cost of yoghurt, he said rudely that that was the cost. I heard him mutter something angrily when I moved away.”

Mr Entwhistle was agitated. “We can’t have that!” I was incensed myself.

Mr Entwhistle called the assistant over loudly. “Mr Singh, please come here at once!”

The bell had rung and the doors of the supermarket had shut by now. A few other assistants drifted toward us behind the assistant Mr Singh.

“Mr Singh, this lady tells me that you have not behaved properly to her a number of times.”

The assistant was an approximately twenty-two year old Indian man who in spite of his business suit looked boyish, his face spattered with adolescent pimples.

“I know. I am sorry.” He looked crestfallen; in fact ready to cry.

Mr Entwhistle recounted all of Mr Singh’s sins. Janice looked mollified by the fact that he remembered them all in detail.

“Yes, I know. I am sorry.” No denial.

About six other staff members were now almost in a circle around the protagonists. Somehow they felt it was their business, too. Mr Entwhistle did not object. This would be a lesson for them too.

“Mr Singh, you know we cannot have such behaviour here. This lady is an old customer of ours, but because of your behaviour she was about to not return to our store. I’ll...I’ll have to...I’m sorry, but I’ll have to...” Mr Fred was basically a kind man, but his eyes looked toward the exit.

His throat and Singh’s were both choked up. You would have heard a pin drop in the hushed gathering.

Perhaps because of the high emotional tension, I clicked into work mode. Perhaps it was the staff, in a circle, that reminded me of group therapy.

I cleared my throat, and my hand went up. It was not a professional gesture, more that of a school boy asking to speak. Everyone looked at me, questioningly.

“Actually, why did you behave so badly?”

Singh’s dark eyes swam as he turned to me.

“I did not want to. It was not my intention, sir.”

“So why did you?”

“I came here to do a good job. My mother said, ‘Do a good job, and maybe you will become something.’ I wanted to work hard, perhaps one day to become a manager. Perhaps learn how to run store. I wanted to do good for myself. I wanted to do good for Mr Entwhistle, the store.”

“OK. So why did you behave badly?”

Singh gulped. “Umm...it is not nice. I should say nothing.” The circle of staff tightened.

“Tell Mr Entwhistle if it concerns him and the work.”

“Umm...it is Mr Bell, my supervisor. He doesn’t talk to me.”

“Mr Bell? Where is Mr Bell?” asked Mr Entwhistle.

“He left early. He said he had some business to do,” said a staff member helpfully. The others sniggered.

Entwhistle now took over. “He does not talk to you? Does not supervise you?”

“I need to know things, but he doesn’t tell me. He does not tell me the system to put things on shelves; just tells me to do it. When cereals disappeared, he just said ‘Discontinued.’ He does not tell me about discounts, so customers complain. He tells me off for everything; never tells me how to do it. If I ask others, he tells me not to.”

“So why did you behave badly to this lady here?”

“I don’t know. She seems to be a lovely lady, like my mother. I don’t want to behave badly. I am sorry.” Singh wiped his eyes.

Mr Entwistle asked, “Singh, if you had another supervisor, do you think you would behave well?”

“Yes, sir!” A collective sigh emanated from the group.

Mr Entwistle looked at Janice. She nodded.

“Would you like to finish your shopping?”

“I’ll just collect a few essentials. I’ll come back tomorrow for the rest. Will you help me, Mr Singh?”

“Yes, madam!”

I trudged the shopping to the car. We went to have coffee.

“I still don’t understand why he was rude to me.”

“You reminded him of his mother. It was his way to tell you something was wrong.”

“But I just got angry with him.”

“And gave him the opportunity to tell what bothered him. And, darling! You took me along to help you.”

“Huh!” Janice looked at me over the rim of her cup, with that look that always made me want to hug her tight.