The Store

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Abstract

My project is a creative nonfiction writing piece based on my experiences working for a branch of a large retail store. This work experience is somewhat atypical as I was hired during a mass hire designed to completely staff multiple store locations opening in Hawaii for the first time in the company’s history. I chose to write the narration with occasionally colloquial language and very brief interjections of stream-of-consciousness to attempt a realistic portrayal of an individual’s view of unfolding events relating to working at this retailer. The narrator tries to have a humorous perspective of many of these events to appeal to a broad, but likely young adult audience. A considerable amount of the humor references specific pop culture items. The structure of the writing is a chronological account following the experience of working for the store. It is divided into chapters that mark the hiring process, the training process, and the public opening of the store.
I'm not growing up, I'm just burning out
And I stepped in line to walk amongst the dead

These particular lyrics in Green Day's song "Burn Out" lingered in my head as I waited in line. I had a shitty cell phone with no Internet, and it was 4 a.m. in the morning so I couldn't call someone to ease boredom. My mind could only occupy itself with itself. But I was tired as hell, and also mildly depressed, so what came and dwelled in my mind was this song by Green Day about being jaded and submitting to the mundane, common lifestyle that many people assume. I had always thought it symbolized the misery of taking a boring job like most of the masses, and walking amongst them. And now the song seemed like a personal anthem as I waited in a line with hundreds, applying for a job at The Store. At least it was a pretty cool song that I didn't mind being stuck in my head. I declare I don't care no more, I'm burning up and out and growing bored, in my smoked out boring room...

The line began on the sidewalk near the front of a huge convention center, stretching out and around a street corner and ending somewhere beyond my sight. I was told to come early if I wanted to finish this whole process before nighttime, and it appeared that I was given sound advice. A few spots behind me in the line, a couple sat in beach chairs and talked story. I imagined them with beers in hand to help them further ease the waiting period. I imagined myself with a beer. Why was I here? Was I so desperate for a job that I would subject myself to this, a scene that resembled a modern, Hawaiian vision of the Great Depression? Yes. Yes, I had no choice now. I needed a job, and they were hiring a lot of people. What did I have better to do at 4:30 in the morning? Who was I going to run into at 4:30? Besides, if I did run into somebody it's not like they would be any less shamed than I.

A group of line-waiters, young people, friends, in front of me were constantly laughing about something. The rising volume of their conversation forced their words into my ears; they were loudly, obnoxiously name-calling one another with crude, vulgar insults, laughing together like a pack of perverse hyenas. Was this the type of company
I could expect from co-workers? We were pretty close to the head of the line compared to the constantly swelling crowd behind us; there was a good chance that if I got hired, I’d be working with at least one of them. Oh, the humanity!

It was interesting to think that if I was hired, even though I’d likely forget about the faces I’d seen in the line, I was standing next to a number of my future co-workers. I looked around, trying not to stare for too long. In the distance I saw what may have been cute girls, but it was dark and they were pretty far away. In close proximity there were the hyenas, the couple sitting on beach chairs, and some other middle aged dudes and ladies. What was that couple going to do with those beach chairs if they got called into a room for an interview? I guess they could just leave them outside the room and maybe have someone watch the chairs for them. Maybe they’d take their chairs into the interview room. The interviewer would tell them, “Take a seat,” and they’d reply, “Nah, no need,” and they’d unfold their beach chairs.

The line started moving! I looked at my phone: it was only 6 o’clock. A pleasant surprise, as I’d heard stories of people who waited in line for more than 8 hours on the first day of hiring. The Store was doing a mass-hire that took place over the course of 4 days, giving jobs to a total of about a thousand workers, or so I was told. These workers would mostly staff the two Store locations on the island, with some being hired for a Store on the Big Island that was opening later. Apparently, the opening of The Store in Hawaii was a pretty big deal, as not only was it a retail chain that had a following amongst local people even before it arrived in the islands, but it also promised to help alleviate the jobless condition of some of the thousands who had been laid off by local businesses due to the financial crunch. Compared to people in this circumstance I felt a bit undeserving of the instant job opportunity, a prospect that seemed unspectacular but certainly better than flipping quarter pounders or sweeping floors. But, a thousand jobs is a lot; plenty to go around.

As I got closer to the entrance of the convention center I noticed the well-groomed trees and greenery that decorated the entrance of the center, and the clean, complex glass and steel architecture that presented in front of us. Perhaps things had come a long way since the bread lines of the 1930’s. As the line pushed forward slowly, but feverishly, the feelings of shame I felt a couple hours earlier faded away and were
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overtaken by a collective excitement that was growing around me. What was going to happen when I walked through those doors? I had preconceived a rough outline of the events that would transpire this day, but the sights and sounds and feel of it all was something I had not considered, and this feeling of uncertainty became stronger as I stepped onto the entranceway and through the doorway.

Cheers went off on both sides of me. Smiling exuberance on the faces of light olive green aloha shirt-wearing people of different size and shape, different age and ethnicity. Two lines of these people were greeting, hooraying, and surrounding, but not quite crowding, our line of job seekers as we made our way inside the building. Grinning in unison, some were clapping, and some seemed like they were the home crowd at a football game. They gave us high-fives as we continued ahead towards a pair of long escalators leading to a higher floor. It wasn’t until I reached the escalators that I realized exactly what had happened, and I felt a smile on my face that was an automatic reaction to all the smiling that beamed around me. It was like the beginning of the Super Bowl crossed with Disneyland. A part of me thought, “What the hell just happened?” Another part of me felt happy simply because of the energy the Store greeters had radiated onto me with their welcoming. I was now awake and ready.

We turned a corner after we got off the escalator and headed towards a wide hallway. A Store rep approached us with paper cups of water—nice. Another rep handed us a folder with some paperwork inside. It all seemed very streamlined, very organized. Since we arrived inside the convention center it felt like we were cars that had driven out of bumper to bumper traffic and onto open, fast roads.

But then some jerk got into an accident ahead of us. Or maybe it was road work, something that couldn’t be avoided. The line slowed, and stalled again. Ahead of us I saw all of the people who were in front when we waited outside in the dark a few hours ago. They filled a long hallway that turned into an open floor area. Here the line was compressed and sectioned off into a movie theater-like zigzag. I didn’t remember there being that many people in line.

The line was not moving at all; perhaps the Store hiring committee needed some extra time to prepare for the next phase of the operation. Or, perhaps we were to use this time to look through the folder that was given to us a few minutes ago. Hmmm.
I followed the pattern of many of the hundreds around me and sat on the hallway floor with my back leaning against the wall, and started looking through the folder. I scanned the papers inside and began filling out the necessities. I came across a section asking what position I would be interested in applying for. The options were many! Sales Floor, Cashier, Cart Attendant (bleah!), Guest Service, Human Resources (hmmm… easy money?), Store Technician, Signing, Planogram (what the?!), Backroom, Overnight Backroom, Management… Which boxes should I check? I certainly did not want to be hired for a position with excruciating tasks like scrubbing toilets or standing in the sun and rain pushing carts back and forth all day. Yet, I also knew that if I listed only one or two job choices that I ran the risk of not getting a job at all. I checked Human Resources, thinking I could sit in a chair away from customers or manual labor during my shifts; I checked Sales Floor, not with enthusiasm but thinking I could do the work acceptably since I had a similar job years ago, and remembering that experience as tolerable and occasionally pleasant; and I checked Ad Display, thinking it might involve setting up billboards and signs throughout the Store, and thinking that sounds pretty cool.

Forms filled, I sat and waited. Earlier in the morning as I waited in the line under streetlights, I felt lonely. Even the hyenas were amongst friends, and doing this thing together could give them a sense of camaraderie and being on a shared journey. Meanwhile, I was alone with thoughts of shame and humility festering in my head. But now, I was becoming too tired to feel pathetic. I placed my folder in my lap and rested my eyes. It was a friendly atmosphere; someone would wake me if the line started moving.

A rustling—the line was moving again! I looked forward to the zigzag head of the line and saw people being ushered into another large double-door opening. Again, a sense of approaching the unknown hit me as I drudged ahead, inching nearer and nearer another new place where there should be employers, representatives, or some other people affiliated with The Store who would put us through the motions of being hired, or turned away. The line moved slowly but the time passed quickly. In contrast to not moving at all, the pace seemed fast. Or maybe it was just anticipation that sped the waiting. As I entered the zigzag I saw two women sitting at a desk, collecting the
paperwork and handing something else back to us. Reaching the two women checkpoint, I received what appeared to be a short paper examination, complete with a separate scantron answer sheet. I realized that we were being led into a large room to take a test of some sort, and as I entered the high ceiling room I saw several dozen rows of long tables, fit for a dining hall (and likely used for such normally) but presently being used for this mass auditorium-scale exam. I sat down at a table and glanced through the test; it was habit for me to look over some lengthy task before starting on it, not necessarily to game-plan or scrutinize the details of the job, but just to get an idea of the size or possible duration of the work. I noticed that many of the questions had obvious answers, to the point of silliness.

What would you do if you were at work and saw a co-worker stealing Store merchandise? Would you:

A) **Tell the co-worker that it is wrong to steal**
B) **Inform your supervisor that you may have seen a co-worker steal merchandise**
C) **Do nothing**

I toyed with the idea of selecting all the worst answers possible just to imagine the reactions of the test graders upon grading the biggest disaster in the history of Store job applications. *This man is indecent! Should we see if he’s wanted by the police?* I snapped out of being crazy and began bubbling in answers.

After handing my forms to a test collector at the end of a long table of graders, I followed the other finishers out of the room and back to the hallway. We were led by a Store rep into another large room nearby. The direction-giving Store reps seemed like marathon guides responsible for keeping runners on track in a race course. I entered this new, darker room and saw a projection display at the front of the room showing people and graphics relating to the Store. This room was nearly as large as the test room, with two sections of chairs facing the projection screen and a speaker booth where a man proclaimed, “How’s everybody doing? You’re almost there! Help yourself to some candy that’s being passed around the room…” I sat down on one of the well-cushioned seats and relaxed. The screen was talking about how new Stores were being opened constantly throughout the United States and even internationally. Different types of Stores were built for different needs, e.g. in large community areas.
there might be an UltraStore that featured fresh produce and other consumables for customers’ dietary needs. I was not quite sure how I felt about this announcement; it certainly was proof that the company was large, wealthy, and likely safe from bankruptcy, but hearing about how it had well over a thousand branches and counting gave The Store somewhat of an imperialist aura.

“McRoberts, Jason.” I got up and joined a group of fellow chosen ones gathering near the exit of the room. We were headed for an interview—we might actually be near the end! We entered yet another extremely large room; just how many huge rooms does this place have? Again there were many tables, but this time they stood individually across the room, with two chairs sitting on opposite ends of each. I was led to an empty table with a number marker placed in the middle of the desk. “Your interviewer will be coming soon.”

The interviewer did not come soon. As I waited there I felt like I was going through the doctor’s office routine. I remembered a related old Seinfeld standup bit where he talked about how first you wait in a big room, and you wait, and you wait, and then they call your name, and you stand up happy and relieved. And then they take you to a smaller room, and you wait.

A young, tall, enthusiastic-looking guy sat down across me. We exchanged friendly greetings, and he began the interview by re-reading some of the questions on the test I had taken, and the answers I had selected. “So you put down that you would first discuss a problem you had with a supervisor with them, and then discuss it with management if you couldn’t get it figured out with them. Why did you say that?” I said that because I thought that’s what they wanted to hear, but I explained, “From what I’ve seen, and what I’ve been told, it’s usually good to try to work out an issue you have with someone with them personally, and then if you can’t get it worked out, then talk to a higher up because it’s pretty serious at that point.” I wasn’t sure if he was totally buying what I was selling, but I could only assume that it was better than the truth. In reality I probably wouldn’t say anything to anybody about a problem I had with a co-worker, unless it truly, deeply bothered me. Then I’d probably go straight to management, unless I hated the manager too. As the interview went on I began to think that my
The interviewer wasn’t in love with this process either; we both smirked at some of the test questions we revisited.

“Ok, thanks a lot Jason, that’s all the questions I have for you. Just wait here and your second interviewer will be here soon.” Second interviewer?! Great googly moogly! How long can this possibly take? Am I really almost finished with this thing, this application? But, inner turmoil soon turned back to fatigue, and after what seemed like a short while the second interviewer arrived. He was also tall, but older, very serious looking. A weary expression seemed engraved upon his face, and it was definitely not the easygoing countenance of the guy whose seat he had taken over. He spoke in a stern, monotone voice.

“What kind of qualities do you have that would make The Store want to hire you?” Huh? I don’t know… what kind of qualities is The Store looking for? The only thing I know about The Store is from what was playing on that looping video earlier… what the hell am I supposed to know about The Store? And isn’t that kind of an arrogant question? A few seconds had passed since he asked the question and I was still staring at him. I needed to say something. “Uh… I’m friendly, and I like helping customers… I once worked at a retail store where I helped customers, and I think I would be able to do a decent job, since it seems similar.” It was not a breathtaking answer but I did not deeply care, because it seemed like a dumb question. I had to be careful not to say anything that would give away how much I disliked this new, old guy. I watched my manners and tried to be polite, but found it impossible to create a lighter, casual mood with Ben Stein’s cousin staring at me.

Thankfully, the second interview ended faster than the first. The sullen interview man walked me to the exit and passed me on to another direction guide-person, who led me out of the interview room. She pointed me in the direction of another hallway and told me to go through the doors at the end and keep going down a walkway where other people would be waiting. I complied quickly, yet dully, feeling drained by the repetitions of waiting, then writing, waiting, then talking. My pace slowed as I trudged down the hallway and out the doors.

The walkway was an open, large balcony area that seemed to comprise the length of the convention center. Entering the walkway I was a little startled, and pleased, to
see blue sky and feel strong sunlight over my skin. The middles of a few nearby buildings were in plain sight, and further in the distance were more buildings, trees, and the ocean that settled into the horizon line. I was not aware that it was now midday, and it was as if I had forgotten what the outdoors was like as well. I crossed a couple of Store reps walking back to the large indoor area of the center, recognizing one from the cheer explosion when I first entered the center. She was a middle-aged woman with spiky punk rocker hair and tattoos covering her arms all the way down to her hands. They'll hire anybody here! I reached a small gathering of people and waited only a moment until a Store rep amongst the group ushered us into a nearby room.

The room was relatively tiny compared to the massive areas we had been to earlier, about the size of a standard classroom. We all sat in chairs and waited while another Store rep seated at a desk was finishing an informative talk with someone who was presumably waiting before us. I eavesdropped on the talk: “Your work center will be number 327, and you’re scheduled for orientation on April 2…” So, this is it! I’m hired. I guess I answered all those questions pretty good. A part of me had been wondering if, at some random point during the whole string of events I had been through, a Store rep would suddenly pop up in front of me and say “Surprise motherfucker! No job for you!” But now, I waited with eagerness and anticipation, waiting for a gift to be handed to me.

My turn was up. Sitting down with the hiring rep, we looked at a few papers in a small folder together. The rep pointed at the important items on the forms while explaining them. “The Store has decided to offer you a job position as a Sales Floor Associate.” I was a little disappointed that I did not get the seemingly less taxing Human Resources job, or the more creative-sounding Ad Display job, but still, getting this seemingly common and personally familiar job title felt fitting, and somewhat inevitable. “A lot of people wrote down Human Resources. I wonder why that one’s so popular?” I guess a lot of people thought it sounded like a job where you sit on your ass all day and probably make the same money as somebody doing manual labor in the building. She pointed at a box marked, “HOURLY PAY: $10.00.” “So this is your starting pay. Is that okay with you?” It certainly wasn’t a dream figure but it was sadly as much as I have ever made in my years of working part-time retail jobs and campus jobs while taking college classes off and on. Yes, that pay is okay with me.
I was given a date for Store orientation, about a month away. I would definitely report to work within several weeks of that date, but I was told to expect to be called in for training much earlier than that. Cool; the sooner I get paid, the better. The folder with the paperwork containing important dates and hiring information was handed to me, and then a handshake was shared between the Store rep and I. Only one thing was left to do: a urine drug test.

For some reason, I held this drug test with a kind of grotesque curiosity. I had done illegal recreational drugs only a few times in my life, and not anytime within the past several years, so there was no way I was going to show positive. But this being the first (and possibly last?) mass-participation urine testing that I was taking part in, gave the whole procedure a kind of novelty appeal. My interest could also have been sparked by thoughts of all the famous athletes and celebrities who tested positive for steroids or cocaine. I remembered actor Tom Sizemore, who in the middle of a drug test was caught using a prosthetic penis designed to emit clean pee from some kind of storage sack hidden in his pants. Sure seemed like a lot of work to maintain a drug addiction! I wondered if the Store would continue to drug test us periodically after hiring us. I could understand the company’s interest in having a standard of sobriety in their workforce, yet I felt like they would be violating some unspoken right we had to be free. If you had to worry about getting randomly drug tested in a job like this, was no place free from Big Brother?

When it was my turn to produce a urine sample, it was handled and done like a quick routine exercise. No special instructions, just go to one of the stalls and pee in a cup while some drug test official stands in a corner of the large restroom and watches you from a distance to make sure you aren’t doing any Tom Sizemore-esque shenanigans. The only strong emotion I had during the whole incident was embarrassment that my pee was pretty dark and foul looking as I handed the cup back to the official. I should have had more water earlier.

Then it was done. I had a job now; the day was worthwhile. Although I had some sense of accomplishment, I felt mostly indifferent towards what I had been through, and was now going to do. I was tired, extremely hungry, but somehow lonely more than anything else. It was 1:30 in the afternoon. I called one of my best friends as I followed...
the exit signs out of the convention center. I summarized what I remembered of the last 10 hours I had just experienced. “Wow, that’s pretty crazy,” he replied, and we laughed at some of the more ridiculous things I had witnessed. When I finished mentioning all the highlights of the day I could remember, I found I had nothing left to say, and neither did he. I said goodbye, and walked towards a nearby shopping center to get something to eat.

Oriented

Physical fatigue and mild starvation aside, getting a job at The Store’s mass hire had not been very difficult. I suppose if you had zero previous work experience and/or was a smartass during the interview process, work may not have been available for you. But in my case at least, it was basically a matter of opportunity: I coincidentally heard about the job openings from a friend only a few days before the hire, and happened to be free and willing to wake up early enough to stand in an endless line on the street at 3:30 in the morning. With that over and done with, I was going to have to do some actual work. I could only imagine that would be generally unpleasant. While I had worked in retail prior to this Store position I was about to assume, the earlier job only scheduled me for four-hour shifts, 15 to 20 hours a week. And I wasn’t exactly a kid in a candy store back then. Now, I was going to work up to 40 hour weeks, under a franchise that appeared to generally have greater expectations for their employees. “Speed is Sales” was one of the catch phrases of The Store that was briefly mentioned multiple times throughout the hire. The faster you provide assistance to a customer, the faster you can stock product onto the sales floor, the faster you can do all of your tasks, the more likely the Store will make sales. I figured the motto was an example of why these guys are going to pay us a little more than what the cashiers make at 7-Eleven.

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The orientation was in what appeared to formerly be an office room. Located in a small shopping mall below an Arby’s, it was far less grandiose a setting as the huge convention center that housed the mass hire. A young, cute, mixed-race woman sat at a fold-out table by the entrance of the room and handed incoming Store trainees a folder and a pen. “The town workers are sitting on the left side of the room,” she instructed me with a familiar smile. “Please have a seat.” Ah, the nice factor, I remember this. Sitting down next to a young, quiet looking fellow on a middle table on the left side of the room, I looked through the folder. It contained a short information form to be filled out, and a long pamphlet on Store working policies. After finishing the form I glanced through the pamphlet. It was written in a format that reminded me of the license agreements you have to scroll through before installing new software on your computer. Thus, I quickly cast it aside. A candy dish was being passed around while a couple Store reps walked around the room to answer any questions we might have. I was feeling again this renewed atmosphere of… Friendliness? Warmth? Sickly sweetness? I suppose I had mixed feelings about whatever it was, but overall, it seemed like a good thing. No workplace I had been a part of ever had this kind of happy policy. I wondered if The Store had taken a page out of Disneyland’s book, where they are committed to being a “feelings business,” and they make it a point never to lose sight of that. While I had doubts about how genuine this air of happy was, so far I had not seen signs that it was a complete farce.

After everyone was in attendance we were shown a variety of Store training videos. While the videos were not as archaic as “Duck and Cover,” they still had their moments of unintentional comedy. One particular scene showed a dramatic recreation of a workplace conflict turned unacceptably violent. A man, apparently upset over something that happened earlier, walks up to a co-worker and stops about six inches away from his face. “Dave, don’t you ever do that again! That was my task, and I’m not going to let you screw it up!” Very awkward dialogue for the body language the angry man was expressing. If he was so emotional that he would have to get right in another guy’s face while speaking to him, I’d figure he’d say something like, “Fuck you Dave! Don’t fucking do that shit again or I will end you, I will fucking end you!” Or, something like, “Dave… I love you. I want you. I need you!”
In between videos, a couple of Store reps took turns answering questions from the audience. A local Chinese guy raised his hand, and when called upon, said, “I just wanted to say that you guys are doing such a great job with the videos, and answering all our questions. I really get this feeling of team spirit here. Thank you!” What the—that was some serious ass kissing! And did that guy even ask a question? Damn, he’s sitting on my side of the room too.

The whole time I was sitting there, I still didn’t have the feeling that I was doing this for a job. I was just sitting down and having a sort of show played in front of me. It wasn’t until the end of the orientation when they handed us our worker uniforms that I felt that this was really happening. The two uniforms were carefully folded into compact rolls, but the olive green aloha print that was on the backs of all the Store reps was clearly visible. I was going to be wearing this to work from now on.

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I got lost trying to find The Store on our first day of training, which is kind of par for the course for me. I ended up driving around the whole block before finding the entrance to the parking area. In doing so, I saw how huge this Store was. The building, beige and unblemished, covered most of the block, with The Store’s name chiseled and illuminated in large, bold, green letters on each outer wall. Also on the walls were leafy bamboo stalks, sculpted in relief. These walls stretched for hundreds of feet without a door or window in sight. Signs of a self-contained hub within?

Walking towards the building, I continued to observe the physical features of The Store. The Store’s trademark color, a kind of emerald-olive green, was only a secondary color on the outside. Through the transparent glass that seemed to cut a viewfinder into the Store at the entrance though, the greenness looked much more widespread. Entering the Store, the green became almost abrasive; the checkout lanes were green, as were many inner walls and shelves that were already in place. Would green be dulled from my color spectrum after working here? A familiar sight greeted me, with the presence of a few Store reps seated at a fold-out table. At their desk I signed in for work, received a sticker name tag, and was pointed in a direction of a man named Jonathan for instructions on what to do today.
In the area I have been pointed towards, two men were building something out of hollow metal rods, possibly a rack to hang things on. I asked for Jonathan, and one man put down his metal piece and answered yes. He looked about 40, maybe part-Hawaiian, strong build, with an elaborate sleeve tattoo. It seemed like the majority of existing workers at The Store had elaborate tattoos; I wondered if I was at a disadvantage for not having any body art. I mentioned that I was told to ask him for directions on what to do today. “I don’t know,” he replied sharply. “We’re going to have a team meeting in an hour. Just join one of the training groups over there until then.” Jonathan went back to building his hanging rack.

I walked towards a spot where several groups of fellow green aloha shirt-wearing trainees seemed to be working on a project. Apparently, many people’s shifts started earlier than mine. One group was smaller the others, so I joined them. The group trainer, Chuck, brought me up to speed with what everybody was doing. “We been putting up backer paper on these walls here. They all learned how to do it so you can join those two over there and they’ll teach you.” The backer paper was a kind of wallpaper that made the shelf walls throughout The Store more colorful, attractive. We had been told during orientation that along with our position training we would be helping build the very Store we would work in. I assumed that “building” wouldn’t involve jackhammers and cement mix; this seemed about right. My new partners and I took turns aligning the large backer papers with the corners of the shelf walls, while one of us secured the paper by pushing plastic screws through the corners of the sheet and into small groove holes on the walls. The process was fun for a few minutes while I was learning how to do it correctly, but became tedious about four backer papers later.

We stopped our backer paper labor for the team meeting, to be held back at the check lanes at the front of the Store. As everyone gathered I noticed for the first time how many of us were in the building that day. What looked like over a dozen groups of ten or so trainees stood in lines separated by the individual check lanes. We faced out to a main aisle of the Store, where a line of managers, differentiated from us by their solid colored-dark green polo shirts, prepared to begin the meeting. “How’s everybody doing today?” a thin, white, 40-something manager exclaimed to us. She said it in a way that effectively elicited cheers from the crowd. She talked about how great it was
that so many of us are here and already she’s seeing everyone working hard to learn about The Store and how wonderful it is seeing people help each other out and all this stuff. She took her time to emphasize the end of her compliments and pause afterwards, so that we could respond with enthusiastic clapping. She then passed the torch to Jonathan, who had some warm-up exercises to share with us before we went on with the rest of our workday, because nobody should get hurt while working in The Store. Jonathan had become a new man as he flashed a toothy grin during every sentence, and moved in an animated manner as he took us through shoulder rolls, arm circles, light jogging in place. It was very silly; elementary school all over again. We ended the meeting with a Store cheer, and then went back to our training groups.

For the rest of the day we continue to apply backer paper to shelf walls. The next day at work, we do yet more backer paper. When we and other groups have finished putting up all the backer paper an establishment could ever ask for, we are finally given new tasks. Sadly, these new tasks were about as mundane as putting up the backer paper; building simple Store hanging signs and fixing label strip holders to shelves for the insertion of pricing labels. I began to feel like Charlie Bucket’s dad, working in a toothpaste factory screwing caps onto toothpaste tubes all day long.

In the middle of the day we were treated to free lunches during our break. The lunches were miniature sub sandwiches, about enough to satisfy a third grader’s appetite. We rectified this by going back in the lunch line after finishing our sandwich and getting another. One guy, Paul, went back for a total of four sandwiches. I asked if it was cool to take so many sandwiches. Paul replied, “Hey, they made us do stupid shit today. I deserve to eat four sandwiches.” Good point! But prior to our next free meal break, we are lectured about taking only one portion, as there are only enough servings for everyone to have one, and last time some people didn’t get anything to eat. Paul and I glanced at each other. Oops! Our bad.

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A couple weeks of training went by, and we began transitioning from simple “building” tasks to job training that would be more relevant to our role as sales floor associates. As Sales Floor members, we would be equipped with two frequently utilized
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devices: a walkie-talkie, and a scanner. The walkie-talkie would be used to communicate with other Store workers for various reasons. If you didn’t know where something was or how something worked, you could use the walkie to ask for the answer. If you needed to find someone in The Store, you ask them on the walkie for their location. There were multiple radio channels you could speak on with the walkies, and we were to switch off the main, general channel and onto a secondary channel for any lengthy communication. Nobody except security had walkie-talkies at my last retail job, and it seemed like a very useful tool provided by The Store. I never really played with walkie-talkies as a kid, so it also was a pretty cool novelty.

The scanner was primarily a price scanner for Store merchandise, but it also performed a number of other functions. After scanning an item’s barcode, the scanner displayed the current selling price of the item, the standard retail price of the item, the quantity of the item that was currently in stock at our Store location, whether there was any extra stock of that item in the back warehouse area, whether the item was currently an active product that would be reordered if the supply sold out, or if it was a discontinued or clearance item, and other information as well. Like the walkie-talkie system, the implementation of the scanner seemed like it would make work easier and more efficient. Perhaps this had already become standard retail store technology by this time, but for me, it was pretty impressive.

Somehow though, this training process we were all involved in was a little bizarre. There were some days where it seemed like we were going over virtually the exact same thing we learned a couple days earlier. Every day there was a team meeting, where often the topics that were discussed seemed either redundant or pointless, and ended with the elementary school warm-up exercises. And during all of this, we were getting paid $10 an hour. If nothing else, it was easy money. Maybe this is what it was like to work for one of the biggest retailers in America? And despite the repetitive nature of our work thus far, it was fun doing these tasks while talking with co-workers, when the manager wasn’t looking. I had never worked for an employer with such a huge workforce, and perhaps because of the great quantity of workers I found a lot more people that had something in common with me than I was used to. Or, a lot of people that were simply cool. Paul almost always had a witty, sarcastic comment or
joke ready for any situation. Another guy, Jeremy, was a self-proclaimed “International Playboy” (IPB) who did these great impressions of other co-workers. He impersonated my somewhat strange sounding speech so well that I didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. A girl named Maile was a big UFC and B.J. Penn fan (like me), and she was friendly and beautiful too. Actually, all I really knew about Maile at the time was that she twice wore a B.J. Penn T-shirt to work under her Store uniform, she once said hi to me, and she had a super hot body. Qualified as a rare and exceptional social phenomenon in my book.

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I found myself following Chuck downstairs into the basement area one day to grab blank shelf labels. I felt kind of sorry for Chuck. He was an older guy, probably in his 50s, yet didn’t seem to get much respect from his trainees. He was pretty soft-spoken and sometimes mumbled when he spoke, making it difficult for him to command the attention of an audience. Although I didn’t think Chuck was the best person to learn things from, he seemed like a decent guy. He reminded me of a character from King of the Hill, and in fact, kind of looked like Hank Hill, minus some hair.

We made our way through the basement in silence, heading towards a faraway storage room that contained various odds and ends for use on the sales floor. After exploring most of the building, it seemed even bigger on the inside. Besides the main floor area that was the size of a few football fields, three large backroom areas that housed some back stock of merchandise were located away from the public areas, and also cold storage rooms for refrigerated and frozen consumable products. The basement area below where we were walking appeared almost as big as the upper level, and housed the majority of back stock along with most of the equipment for transporting merchandise throughout The Store. In practice, maybe The Store really could function as a manmade biosphere: there was food, beverages, medicine, clothing, furniture, sporting goods and exercise equipment, movies and video games, artificial plants, and alcohol.

As we continued to approach the storage room I felt the urge to break the silence with small talk. I asked Chuck what his position was at his Store back home; Sign
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Technician, he replied. I asked him if he’d always been a Sign Technician. “No, no. I was all kinds of things before. Before I was in Signing I was with Price Accuracy. Before that I was in the back room. And before that I was in the overnight team.” “Wow, I see. So… when you heard about a chance to come to sunny Hawaii you decided to come over here to train us, huh?” “Well, I been here already, with my wife. Yeah it’s nice over here, I like it a lot. But they just asked me if I could come over here for the training, and that was it.” Some silence passed, then Chuck said, “You know, it ain’t so bad working for The Store. I mean, there’s always a lot of guys coming and going, a lot of guys find something better and they move on. But if you stick with it, it’s pretty good. It ain’t too bad.”

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A week before The Store’s grand opening, a large number of us stood in a team meeting held in the rear back room of the building. We were about to begin “working the push,” Store-speak for stocking merchandise that the electronic inventory system determined could fit onto shelves on the floor; moving products from the back room onto the sales floor with the use of push carts, taking the products out of their cardboard boxes, and placing the products on the shelves for customers to purchase. Before that though, a Store meeting was to be led by our friendly manager for the day. Today it was Jonathan, who had turned out to be a pretty good guy, with a sense of humor in his own right. He gave the floor to a security manager who told us the importance of parking in the employee-designated area of the lot, because extra cameras were pointed at that spot to protect our longer-parked cars. “Hey, that’s good to know,” Jonathan added. “I used to think that that you guys would just look at the parking lot cameras and say, Hey look at that cool car over there! Just kidding guys.”

“I did want to talk about something I’ve been seeing around the Store recently. I see a lot of guys kinda starting to slack off and not pay attention during the training activities. I know some people are going through a training more than once. But remember, now’s the honeymoon period. When we open up, and all those customers start running through those doors, some of your eyes are gonna pop out of your head. It’s going to be crazy. But just remember to be calm, and remember your training.
That’s why it’s so important that we go through so much training, so that the things you are learning become second nature.” Hmmm… so all this time, we were going through some Karate Kid-style repetitive-but-useful drills? *Show me… Wax the floor! Show me… Paint the fence!* And our bodies would react automatically to handle the rapid demands of the customers? But the thing is, we weren’t training through physical repetition as much as we were standing around and listening to someone talk most of the time. Years of school taught me that when instructed through straight lecturing, most of the time I was going to catch up on my sleep more than retain useful knowledge, much less useful skills. But I did think it was pretty cool that he called our training the “honeymoon period.” It made me a little concerned too, that maybe, the kid gloves we were being handled with were a far cry away from preparing us for real customers, who might be stomping on us in a few days.

**Opened Up**

*Opening Day.* We had been told to forget about parking anywhere in The Store’s parking lot, so I got my mom to drop me off in the morning. Surprisingly, I wasn’t scheduled to begin work until just 15 minutes before 8 o’clock, when the doors would open to the public. I figured they’d want to go over last minute instructions on what to expect for what would surely be a busy day. They must have been confident that we were all prepared to improvise.

From about a block away, the traffic near The Store was slowing to a crawl. As we slowly approached the front of the building on a side street, I could see the line of people gathered. The front of the line was kept orderly by a metal barricade fence and police officers patrolling every so many yards. Traffic cops were turning back any cars approaching the completely packed lot. My mom dropped me off on the street, and I hurried to the employee entrance.

The crowd was a massive mob. From the entrance of the Store, people formed a dense stream of a line that extended to the edge of the right side of the building, and coiled around the adjacent wall, ending who knows where. The scope of this picture was certainly reminiscent of our first day with The Store, the day we all stood in the long
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line and waited for a door to open for us. Yet, this image was also very different: the people in this line looked wide-awake, eager, a little jittery. No one was wearing formal business attire; jeans, shorts, mini-skirts, spaghetti straps, t-shirts, tank tops. Many could have been on their way to a picnic, or a party. It looked like a lot of people were having fun. I might’ve wished I could switch places with someone in the crowd, if I hadn’t seen this place almost every day for the past two months.

I showed my worker ID and driver’s license to Store security at the front door, and made my way to the time clock a short distance away and behind the check lanes. The hallway where the time clocks were located was full of dozens of us. I waited in line to punch in. I recognized Kenji, a work-friend of mine, who was headed back out to the floor. “No walkies or scanners,” he informed me. “Wow. Really?” It made sense after I thought about it. With probably half the damn workforce all out working this morning, it’s easy to imagine there wasn’t enough equipment to go around. “So we’re going all natural huh?”

After punching in and nudging my way towards an empty locker to stash my wallet and phone, I looked around for a manager or a familiar face, someone to tell me the protocol for today. I saw Seth, a fellow Sales Floor Associate who was recently promoted to Sign Technician. Pretty impressive that he managed to in two months what may have taken Chuck 15 years. As this Store’s Sign Technician though, he was supposed to begin working overnight shifts when The Store opened. I asked him what was going on. “Yeah, I’m still switching to overnight, but they needed me to help the sales floor since it’s gonna be so crazy busy this first week. All hands on deck I guess!” I asked him if we were having the traditional team meeting this morning. “Nope! No-huddle offense baby! Let’s go!” He waved an arm towards the sales floor as he strode in that direction himself. Seth was another pretty cool guy, and along with a fun sense of humor, his energy never seemed artificial at all. I can see why they promoted him, as he had just evoked William Wallace in a nutshell. Let’s do this, indeed!

I followed Seth onto the floor. I was assigned to the domestics block of the sales floor and quickly split paths from Seth, who continued down the main aisle towards toys. I asked a passing associate for the time: a few minutes till opening. I paced up and down the aisles nervously, as there was nothing to do now but wait. I disliked the
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domestics block. Girly stuff: towels, curtains, pillows, sheets... bright copper kettles and warm woolen mittens, brown fuzzy slipcovers tied up with string. These are a few of my least favorite things! But, at least I’m not alone. I’m in there with dozens of fellow trainees. We’re all green, still undoubtedly green for the most part. Like Seth said earlier though, it’s go time. When the Americans landed on D-Day, a lot of them didn’t know the shit they were in for, but in the end they won! Sure, a lot of them got gunned down, but with superior numbers the odds are on your side. And we certainly had numbers: about five of us were assigned to every major block. If I didn’t know something, chances are one of the other four dudes in my area would have the answer.

I heard the faraway scream of the crowd, followed by a very faint rumbling sound. We’re open. Within what felt like seconds the first few people pushing shopping carts turned into our main aisle at a brisk pace. In moments, a dozen more followed them. Repeating the program of our training, we asked guests who approached us, “Are you looking for anything today?” I did this a few times, pointing one customer in the direction of light bulbs, and being told “No thanks” by a couple others. After that, asking our catch phrase was hardly necessary. The aisles had been swarmed, and customers were a step or two away in every direction, many who were quick to stop us for directions. Immediately after one customer had been assisted, a middle-aged lady asked me where bed risers were. While walking to one end of the block and trying to help her, and myself, find where the bed risers are located, a man stepped in front of me and asked where the automotive supplies are. I pointed towards a large, hanging overhead sign that read “Automotive,” then resumed my search for the bed risers. A few paces later, another woman cut me off with a wave of her hand and asked me if I knew what’s on sale today in this area. I don’t know... I had assumed we would receive a copy of the ad earlier in the morning but there weren’t enough to go around. I told her she could try going to customer service and getting one there. She frowned slightly, undoubtedly unhappy about backtracking through a mob to get an ad, and perhaps, also irritated that I didn’t know shit about what was on sale.

Now, what was I doing? I turned around and saw the middle-aged Asian lady still patiently following me. I saw one of the assistant managers stepping out of a nearby aisle. “Heather!” I shouted. Some customers turned their head towards my
considerable yell, but thankfully Heather did as well. I hurried towards her and asked where the fucking bed risers were. She pointed out an aisle that was about eight feet away from where we stood.

After going through many customers in this fashion for what felt like hours, Samantha, an executive manager, called out to me. She normally had a cheerful and bubbly face, but now her eyes looked frustrated; no smile. “Jason! I need you to clean up the towels in D14. This place is going nuts!” I had completely forgotten that we had other tasks besides customer service. One task was doing our part to keep the merchandise on shelves organized and tidy. I went to D14, and saw towels crumpled and mixed up all over, towels on the floor. It looked like kindergarteners had run through the aisle. Now, this was practically the exact reason I hated the D-block: I couldn’t fold a towel to save my life. I mean, I could fold a towel my way. Fold it in half, then fold it in quarters. Then fold it in eighths if it’s a big fucking towel. But these Store guys, they have this precise method of folding towels, where you need to fold it in half along one side of the towel, then you have to fold it in thirds or something so that the towel pattern is facing a certain way. Or something like that; it was kind of case-dependent. And if you folded them the wrong way and the manager caught you, you’d receive an embarrassing scolding and have to refold them all. In order to fold these towels “the right way,” I had to study the anatomy of a correctly folded towel by unfolding it, then refolding it; learning through reverse origami.

Ten minutes and about two correctly folded towels later, another executive manager called for my attention. “Right now we need everybody to head on to the back and work the push.” I was relieved. See ya later towels! I weaved my way through the customer crowd and toward the rear stock room of the Store.

The rear back room was filled with carts and flatbeds full of product. Much like the parking lot, it had been transformed into a different place from the memory of our training. Drawing on a lesson learned from those days, I grabbed a cart with the biggest boxes on it, as a cart with lots of little boxes in it took a lot longer to stock, and could set you on a pretty long journey. With the jungle out there, I might be still pushing a cart like that until tomorrow.
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I went out on the floor again with my push cart that looked really full but actually had only 5 items in it. I had learned that in The Store there were many ways of taking shortcuts, learning how to fall through the cracks; one of the benefits of working for the biggest company on the block is that it’s gotta be hard to keep track of every peon’s individual performance. My scanner led me to the small appliances block of the store. With two rice cookers in hand, I reached an aisle blocked by a sales associate and an irate customer with her shopping cart next to her. She was quite angry.

“So you’re telling me that there’s no demo model for this vacuum cleaner, the only one I’m interested in, and you won’t even let me open a box and see what one looks like? I’m very disappointed in your Store!” A Customer Almighty: someone who expects every worker and company policy to bend to the will of her twenty-dollar bill. I had seen these people before and thankfully hadn’t encountered any earlier this morning, but it was inevitable that one would appear eventually. I tried waiting for a pause in the conversation to ask her to excuse me, but her argument was in rapid fire. The associate had apparently already used his walkie to call a manager to the scene, but this was not sufficient to even temporarily stop her tirade. “Why is your manager taking so long? You people are going to need a demo model for this one eventually, I don’t understand why you won’t let me open a piece of tape and look inside the box? How am I supposed to know if I want this if I can’t see it?” Maybe you can look at the picture on the box? I could understand the customer’s displeasure at our pretty rigid “no opening sealed boxes” policy, but it really didn’t seem like she’d learn a whole lot from just having it in front of her, unplugged. What exactly are you going to gain from running your fingers across the plastic vacuum cleaner chassis? But here I am, standing around holding these two rice cookers and observing your complaints like a stupid statue, like waiting for Niagra Falls to run dry.

Her cart was unattended and kind of behind her, so I decided to push it a few feet away to give myself room to squeeze by. I held the rice cookers in one arm and gently pushed the handle of her cart away from her.

“That’s mine!” It was like she turned around with a megaphone. I was startled, and my hands fumbled. The rice cookers—fell! I caught one as it was falling but the second hit the ground with a loud crash, narrowly missing the feet of the angry lady. It
tumbled a couple of times with the sound of broken glass crunching inside the box. I think my heart skipped a beat.

“God! Is everybody who works here an idiot?”

“I’m really sorry, I apologize,” I said as I knelt to the floor to pick up the demolished rice cooker.

“How can I help you?” I stood and turned around. It was Greg, the manager. Fuck. So this was the end. So sudden, so soon. I guess if I ever get a job like this again, I should go around to the other end of an aisle to enter it if one side looks blocked.

“I just want to look inside this box, I came all the way from Kaneohe and I just want to see what this thing looks like.”

“I’m sorry, but I can’t open this box. It’s security sealed so we aren’t able to open it before it’s been purchased. I can show you this demo model for this model over here, it’s pretty much the same but it’s a different color.”

“Are you retarded? I want to see what this one looks like, I already saw that one!”

“I’m sorry but I can’t open that box.”

“Are you fucking kidding me? I want to talk to your boss.”

“I am the boss.”

“You’re the boss? And you won’t let me look in the box? You’re a fucking ass hole. I drove all the way down here from Kaneohe, and—”

“I’m going to have to ask you to leave. We can’t have people swearing in the Store.”

“What? Fuck you! You’re a fucking ass hole!”

“I’m sorry but you’re going to have to leave. Please, if you could follow me—”

Fuck you!” The now extremely angry lady had begun sort of walking sideways towards the exit while still glaring and cursing at Greg. He followed her for several paces, and then came back to us when it was apparent she was leaving The Store, presumably never to return.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I think I broke this rice cooker.”
“It’s okay, it happens. Just take it to Customer Service and tell them to defect it out.” Somebody called for Greg on the walkie. “Okay, I’m coming from appliances.” He looked back at us as he started walking towards his latest manager duty. “Thanks guys.”

I guess I wasn’t fired! And wow, Greg was a good guy. I had seen a lot of other retail managers let customers have their way by “making an exception” for them, in similar past scenarios. They might not agree with the way Greg handled this situation, and I could understand their logic, but it was nice, for once, to see someone who didn’t believe the customer was always right. ‘I am the boss.’ Ha! I wanted to talk with my co-worker about the spectacle we had just witnessed, but thousands of customers were still hustling around us, and we had our things to do.

A half-hour later I was in the rear back room again, returning my empty cart and grabbing a new, full one. A manager from the mainland was directing the activity, trying to keep the push carts organized and communicating with incoming sales associates about what we needed to do. She was one of many managers and trainers brought in from the mainland, here for our training period and apparently also for additional manpower during the opening. I asked her if I should just keep coming back to grab push carts until further notice. “Yep, that’s what you’ll be doing most days. Keep coming back here to grab a push, and if it looks good over here, then go to the front of the Store and put back the misplaced items they organize at customer service.”

As I robotically stocked items on the sales floor, I began thinking about what I was doing. I guess, ultimately, I’m pretty much what I was years ago all over again. A stock clerk. There is definitely a difference in volume between The Store and the store I was at before, and it seemed certain now that it would be physically harder working at this place. But in terms of responsibilities, engagement, experience… it could all be filed into the same category as my previous work life. So, working here is a lateral step, not a forward one. It felt like, for many years now, I had been taking lateral steps. Barring a change in my course, I was walking on a path of mediocrity, maybe worse than that. The thought was fleeting more than festering in my head, as I was beginning to feel exhausted and was still occupied by the push cart, and the customers who, less frequently but still steadily, asked me for directions.
A few months later, in the middle of an afternoon shift one day, I was putting a misplaced Tickle Me Elmo doll back on its proper shelf when Todd asked for me on the walkie. “Sales associate Jason, can I get your assistance at aisle G27? I need help with a two-person lift.” At The Store, all merchandise that weighs over a certain amount is designated as a two-person lift, and if stocking such an item you must ask another worker for assistance with moving it.

“I’m on my way,” I replied into my walkie. G block: furniture, probably a big desk that was on sale. When I got nearby the aisle I saw Todd step out from another corner and motion for me to come to a different aisle instead. It was crowded in the Store but Todd was 6’5” and always easy to spot him from afar. “Where’s the lift?” I asked.

“Dude,” Todd whispered, “check out the chick in G27. Pink tank top.” He extended his palms in front of him as if he were holding two watermelons to his chest. “Huge!” I stared at him for a second, half in disbelief that he called me from two blocks away to look at a girl’s tits, half in amusement.

“Alright,” I said with a grin that I could not suppress. She was at the end of the aisle facing a shelf; hopefully unaware of my voyeuristic presence. She looked Asian, with long hair, grey sweatpants, and a pink tank top that revealed several inches of cleavage. Indeed, they were huge! I did a double-take, and then went back to Todd.

“Man, that’s amazing,” I said with a chuckle.

Todd laughed. “I told you dude! You know what would be cool? I should go up to her and say, ‘Excuse me miss, but could you help me with something? I have something stuck in my eye. Do you think you could just lean forward a little bit, and then I can—’” He suddenly shook his head quickly left-to-right, imitating a motor boat. I broke out laughing, practically covering my mouth with my hand to keep from making a scene.

“What’s going on here guys?” It was Terry, the brown-nosing Chinese guy I first met during orientation months ago. He was now my boss.

“There’s a customer who needs assistance in G27,” Todd replied. He did the watermelon-holding hand motion again.
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“Oh! Okay, I'll go look into it,” Terry said with a quiet, excited laugh. Moments later, Terry came back; he concurred.

Later that night, Todd, Paul, and a bunch of us were going to a karaoke get-together with about ten other friends. At this point, I felt comfortable calling many of my co-workers friends. I hadn’t foreseen this; becoming good friends with a pretty large amount of people at work. Even some of the management, while not people I hung out with outside of work, had become close enough that I could tease them like they were a buddy of mine, and not someone who might get me fired me if I bothered them. The Store policies remained the same: “Speed is Sales,” “Great customer service, every customer, every time,” etc, etc. But by this time, I knew the personalities behind many of the job titles at our Store pretty well. And I really liked a lot of these personalities. It made most days at work surprisingly fun. I still hoped that I would be able to do something else in the near future, something where the actual job was fun and not just my co-workers. But I was getting paid every two weeks, and tonight I was going to the biggest karaoke party I could remember being a part of. I had reasons to be grateful.