

DARE TO SOAR

Each month a new motivational poster above the urinals: nature scenes with slogans like DARE TO SOAR. Management Trying to love us.

..... I didn't want to admit it, but I was heading straight to the bottom.

- Chris Green, "Janitor"

At first, I was just sick of saying "Have a Great Day," a thousand times a shift –

"Have a great day!"

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"Have a great day!"

Something about it tasted like sucking on pennies. I felt like somebody's plastic pet monkey. Soon, I started giving it my own little twists so that customers really knew I meant it. I'd say things like "Have a really great day, sir!" Or, "Have a spamtabulous day, ma'am!" Or I'd start saying goodbye to people in other languages, so I'd say "arrivederci" to a sexy couple in leather jackets, or

I'd give a "ciao" to the kids wearing dark glasses and gangster hats, or a solemn "shalom" to those whose dour scarfs and long brown coats seemed sad enough to exude the need for it.

And sometimes I'd mix up the idiom and say "arrivederci" to the young criminals and they'd look at me like I was higher than them, or I'd say "shalom" to the couple just back from dancing lessons and they'd hush up like they were in church.

But, after a couple of weeks, I still needed to diversify and customize my portfolio of greetings because every day more and more people needed their cheese sticks, hair plaster, and delusional "news" and because management, that amorphous, non-descript, sexless herd of wind-up animals in suits, was just breathing down my neck to make people have a "satisfying experience."

I started to really dial up the satisfaction and please the people. Now, it wasn't just things I'd say anymore, but things I'd do. Actions. Words were insufficient. The same person goes through your line fifteen times a week and words, any words, become TV fuzz or that wrenching nausea you get after having sex with someone you shouldn't. So, for the hobbling old bird who wore her oxygen tank nose piece like a silver star, I cranked the regulator from a seven to an eleven and gave her a little pat on the saddle bag. To the waddling man-duck with extragalactic nebula eyes dragging around a snotty whirlwind of children, I'd offer a brief massage on the shoulders and watch his face melt into the cosmos.

Needless to say, for every hundred disappointed old men who would shamle off in quiet desperation, there was one pervert who would recoil because I had hit that sore spot in the unconscious. So when Old Man Morality showed up, I pulled my Taser. I had it set on low, so the bulwark of values and good sense would just get a little nip as I gave the gag order. Of course, no system of intimidation is air tight, so I got this nagging sense of paranoia.

For the most part, no one said anything and my satisfied customers kept writing brief but flattering surveys about that nice, clean-cut girl who looked like the one in the advertisements and

brightened their day. Brightened their day so much, in fact, that they'd come back to buy things specifically in order to go through my line. I started to think of it as the "ME SHOW" and I started to enjoy it, even if the fun could sometimes get out of hand. I figured it was worth it and what management wanted anyway, even though they didn't state it directly and explicitly in the manual.

And I was right, because that's how I got promoted.

Of course, as valedictorian at the local high school, the congratulatory bump from twenty to sixty hours a week was a little rough, but all those smiles from co-workers and my face on the "Employee of the Month" plaque really helped, so I just said "thank you" like my mom told me to and kept right on working like I always had.

After a couple weeks of my congratulatory, expanded schedule, I felt like turning on, tuning in, and dropping out because I contracted chronic fatigue and my ten cent raise just felt like a cruel joke played on a reality TV show, the audience laughing at my misery at home. All my smiling co-workers blended and shifted into this weird haze of mocking clown faces.

I was bringing in a ton of extra money for corporate and I figured at some point management would listen to reason and give me some of it, so I just kept pushing. I even upped the stakes on the "ME SHOW" and handed out fliers and put up strobe lights and assembled a stage and did all kinds of song and dance just to satisfy, satisfy, satisfy the ever-loving customer! I did cabaret tunes and a comedy routine. I danced the Charleston and lectured on Relativity, but nothing! Management, that herd of faceless square-heads, smiled and gave me a new name tag.

Now, how was I supposed to write this god-damn valedictorian speech about "Our Great Future" that everyone expected of me if I was stuck gratifying customers? How was I supposed to get ready for my career as a poverty law attorney or do anything at all if I couldn't tell which visual stimuli were real and which weren't, shambling around in a constant state of vertigo like voters in Kansas?

But I tried to believe my mom when she told me “crises are catalysts,” so I just dragged, dragged, dragged my ass through it until help fell from the skies! I passed out one day coming off the truck, smashing a case of retro-classic cola bottles under me, and I must’ve just laid there on the ground twitching and cutting my face all up when Jesus, the Mexican security guy who worked six jobs to pay for his mom’s dialysis, revived me with a healthy bump of amphetamines. I was hooked! He said he could keep himself going for like 72 hours and then had to sleep for like 10 but that still saves you two night’s sleep for every three. That pretty much fixed my problems and I was set to send folks’ satisfaction straight through the stratosphere!

A few days into my amphetamine-cure I noticed that pretty much everyone loves guns and I got to wondering about how little firepower there actually is in a shopper’s experience. If you can’t go one blockbuster movie without a gun, why deprive folks while shopping? So, I asked Jesus if he’d do Wild West showdowns with me at certain scheduled times, and then I asked management if I could blow up a truck with bombs I learned to make on the internet. They didn’t even say anything, just walked away. Huh! So much for innovation! In the end I just decided to buy a .357 off my cousin Jaxson and see how the spirit moved.

When I started to carry concealed under baggy clothes that cheerleader Allie in the pharmacy asked me if I was anorexic and depressed over my boyfriend or something and I said “No, I’m on meth, you bitch, and I need these clothes for carrying my chrome!” She laughed it off and we became friends.

But, again, I felt like “enough talking and not enough doing.” Action! My holster-hip was itching all the time: if I gave some guy a shoulder rub and he gave me a sourpuss face I’d envision him out of his misery, his brains splattered all over the fools in the next lane, or if some cranky old bag took too long fishing for a penny in her handbag I’d see myself reaching over and nipping off a toe.

Then, sometimes when I was put on cart duty for my occasional dark mood, I would actually pull it out, out of sight of all the cameras Jesus let me in on (even those not in the little black orbs everyone knows about), and I would train the crosshairs on some opioid addict walking into the pharmacy across the street or at someone serenely walking their dog and just squeeze the trigger a tiny little bit and then let go.

The day we finally had a “shots fired” alarm in the parking lot, it was such a hoot, everyone got so excited! We were on the news! When the cops showed up, I told them that I saw two burned out old pickup trucks with rebel flags blow off some shotgun rounds as they drove out to the country where they used to have the meetings of the fraternal brotherhood, which was the truth. What I didn’t tell them was that I coaxed it out of them with a salutary shot at the sky. It ain’t no coincidence that “fun” rhymes with “gun”!

Just as I was building these sorts of synergistic relationships with my customers, Jesus got a run in his stocking and told me that he had seen me fire the first shot so that the country boys would fire back. I told him that he’d lied to me. He was flummoxed. I said I didn’t know what such a liar was flummoxed about, liar. He didn’t understand. I said I was not in sight of any, any, any of the cameras he’d told me about, liar, and I was crouched between a Beamer and a bush, so there would be no way to see if I had done what I didn’t do. He said he was driving in his car and saw me from a distance. I maintained that the probability of that was just about zero and he was obviously lying. He said he had to go to work and I said “Wait! Let’s talk tonight, I’m so upset right now!” He agreed to meet in our secret spot by the river.

I had to pull my shit together. I had no idea if he’d already told management or if I was going to be met at our appointed spot with undercover cops or if he just wanted to blackmail me for sex or money or drugs or what; I felt like a trapped animal and started sweating like I did when I was nine and got caught shoplifting *International Poverty Law* from Barnes & Noble.

After my shift, I tidied up and got myself ready to bring the A-game. Jesus was the only eye witness to my crime, so it was my word against his, and who would the country cops believe, an All-American valedictorian or a Mexican immigrant? Regardless if I was talking to Jesus trying to use some leverage on me or detective W, X, or Y, from precinct Z, I was determined to shine and charm like the All-American we all knew I was.

When I got to our spot, I was surprised to see he was dressed in a lithe business suit that made him look taller and stronger than his exhaustion, addiction and poor nutrition would allow. I turned off my car and walked over to his. He said something but he's a little mush-mouthed already and I could tell he was feeling a little shy about whatever he was trying to get out of me, so all I heard was "propose." He couldn't be talking about that, so I rubbed my hands together and opened my eyes wider.

He said "You think?"

I said "I don't know." And he patted the seat next to him.

I got in the car and smiled, charmingly. "Jesus, I like you a lot, but I'm not sure . . ."

He gestured me into silence with a sweep of his hand and then settled into a saturnine meditative posture collecting his thoughts while I waited through a taut silence. He broke the long silence with some garbled preaching to the dashboard, then some soliloquizing to his feet, then his line of sight would brush mine, and then he'd gaze out the window at the stars smiling at some inwardly grasped absurdity.

Just as I thought we'd never reach any kind of understanding, he said something about "robbing my bank" and it touched a chord of recognition inside me. My first inclination was that he was finally getting around to talking about sex but he didn't look the least interested when I pulled up my skirt, so I kept listening. He kept on murmuring about how much money I'd earned and how much was stolen from me that was rightfully mine that I should take back and what great things I

could do with myself if I weren't confined to these rules and these circumstances and how I'd probably do much better things with the money than those fat bloated pigs who channel it all to their own troughs and how universities in Mexico could be just as good as the ones here and how you could create a completely new and legitimate identity for just a few hundred dollars and then I finally understood. "Jesus!" I screamed at the shattering of my apoplexy. Inward spilled the logic of this riddle, and the plan was cracked!

The day of the heist was the most nerve-racking of my entire life. The painful part was that there was no direct action I could take. We didn't have to do anything but wait. Wait. Wait. Wait. Wait. Wait. And that was torturous. There was nothing we could do but wait for Violet, Jesus' pet monkey, to pull off the heist we'd planned.

Jesus had rescued Violet from a military detainment camp where high level officials had done weird experiments on animals and detained illegals. I could tell in our interactions that she was really well trained and more intelligent than most humans but at the same time wary of people with whom she was unfamiliar. Over the weeks between the plan and the heist I'd gone over to Jesus' little trailer at the base of a mountain and gotten to know her. What had they done to you, Violet? I wondered aloud alongside her, but it was soon apparent that no specifics would ever surface. After a few visits with Violet hiding behind old threadbare chairs or running off to a stream behind the trailer, she learned to trust me and would hug me as a greeting and a farewell. We would have long sign language conversations about what to eat or the sounds of birds or our moods for the day. She knew when I was nervous or sad and would try to comfort me by stroking my hair or bringing me a snack. She beat me at Chess every time, this having been part of her training at the detainment camp. Another part of her time in captivity was the memorizing of covertly planned operations and the following of directions on maps. This use of a monkey trained in the ways of elite infiltration

forces, we knew, made the heist viable and nearly untraceable, but, still, I couldn't shake the jitterbugs.

Being so intelligent and well trained, we were pretty sure the whole time that things would go off just fine; but when you're breaking so many of the human animal's sacrosanct rules you never know where you'll end up. The plan was simple. Violet would go in through an air duct accessible from the loading docks in the back of the store and crawl through the clandestine root system of vents and ducts of heating and cooling to the top secret room in the basement where they kept the vault with all the money. Since Jesus was the security guy, he knew all the secret passcodes and, more importantly, the vault schedule. We had trained Violet together in Jesus' trailer with the blueprint for the air ducts and vault's passcodes that he used to open it for the armored transport people. We tested Violet a thousand times. She'd responsibly and sweetly trace her finger over the lines of the blueprint correctly. And, again, patiently, a thousand times over, she'd knock out the passcodes on a dummy version of the vault key pad we made and she'd look up at us like "please don't make me do it again, I know what to do."

If all went well, Violet would just drop right in the room, fully in view of all the cameras, open the vault, take the appointed amount of cash and leave a receipt for \$73,645.35 from Employee X. Luckily, I had kept receipts from the "ME SHOW" and I figured, after overhead and production costs, that this was exactly what I was owed. I even figured that this attempt at reimbursement for my labors might hold up in an international court of law, though probably not an American one. By the next morning as management was watching a video of a monkey clean house we'd be hittin' the border and leaving behind all the bullshit!

From our vantage point in Jesus' car behind the store, backed up to a strained looking field used for dumping, we watched Violet deftly remove the grate for the air duct and slip inside with the agility of a trained covert agent. There was nothing more we could do. No actions. We just sat in

Jesus' car hugging each other in absolute terror while the sun came up and waited for a trained monkey to outwit a whole pack of humans and leave a receipt that they would never understand. I had a watch that told time by the hundredth of a second that I had used for track and we sat there in austere silence watching it madly twittering away. A thousand hours were crammed into a minute. The sun's maddeningly slow move through the sky made me feel like I was crammed inside a straightjacket and I wanted to scream, scream, scream at the terrorizing calm of the birds and the trees and the clouds.

Then, after twenty minutes exactly, an immobilizing black hole of despair gripped my heart and spread through all my nerves and synapses. I knew. I just knew she had been caught. Maybe killed. Reluctantly, I started imagining bullets tearing through her sweet, innocent body. Guards handling her in that nightmare brutality I imagined of the detainment camp. She could never explain the tangled webs of which she was a part to numbskull Americans who didn't know sign language. That icy loneliness she must be feeling. Or worse. And it was all our fault. Two stupid meth addicts who wanted off the goddamned spirit breaking treadmill.

The town's old air raid siren went off like the ghosts of progress had just been summoned for judgment day. Fire engines and cop cars were speeding and swerving through the streets. We were fucked. I knew it. I told Jesus to fucking do something! And, stiff as a wooden Indian, he pointed at the grateless vent. Out popped the unceremonious shopping bag we'd sent Violet with. It fell to the ground in a crumpled heap. And there she was!

Oh, I wish I had videoed that sweet little devil Violet popping out of the air duct right where I had lost consciousness and cut my face on broken bottles. With a broad "Mission Accomplished" smile, she waved like a true freedom fighter from the duct and dropped out with a deft, acrobatic flourish. In the rising dawn she dawdled and sauntered across the parking lot, proud of the successfully executed plan, proud as any entrepreneur with an artful deal.

As we sped toward the airport with our monkey in her car seat amidst the crisis flushed local volunteers speeding off to some accident, I saw my sobbing mother driving to her secretary job as she had about six thousand three hundred and seventy eight of her last seven thousand days. She'd probably read my note. I told Jesus to turn the car around in my utter guilt, but that only reminded me of his mother. I asked how she was doing. He told me she had spent weeks at the local hospital in decline and had only last night died. The body would be sent to Mexico and buried on what was left of the family land. We might be able to make the funeral. I told him I was terribly sorry and wrote a note on my hand to call home in the next week.

A few drinks and a few hours' worth of snuggle-time-with-a-monkey later and our private chartered Cessna, paid in cash, was touching down in that old Spanish colonial town of San Antonio. We got in our plastic rental car and Jesus started telling me about old Mayan towns his family would find out in the middle of unspoiled fields where no "civilized" human had been for hundreds of years. You'd cut through the brush for weeks at a time, he said, and then all of a sudden – boom! – you make it over a ridge and there was a thirty foot wall of limestone brick that had blooming flame vines twirling around it and all these sun seasoned people who know nothing of retirement plans or mortgages or debts would look up at you like "What the fuck do you want?" Right there, by the coast, a couple hundred people using the same buildings, tools, and languages for five-hundred years in an unbroken chain. Languages not recorded anywhere. Communities not on any map. No idea about any Country to fight and die for or Landlord to pay the rent to or Commodity that will finally fulfill all your desires. Just people living with each other and with the earth. But sometimes, too, he said, you would cut through the thicket for weeks and find nothing.

I told him I was famished and we had a few hours, if not days, before border control was alerted to be on the lookout for a high school valedictorian traveling with an immigrant and a monkey. So, we stopped at a very bright and visible GRAND OPENING!

Waving and whapping in the wind high above the joint in this boilerplate “Everywhere USA” plaza was the place’s signature flag: superimposed over the solid color blocks of the Lone Star flag were two grimy but shined up revolvers with twirling gun smoke. It was meant to impress, and probably should have given my skylarking with firearms, but it just made me nauseous.

Approaching the place I noticed that there seemed a dolorous haze hanging about and I figured it was a gimmicky fog machine or something. But no! As we stepped in, all the employees and some patrons raised their weapons and - BATATATATATATAT!!!!!!!!!!!!!! - fired into the ceiling already torn up with friendly fire. Poor Violet cried in terror and pounded on the glass door and it took me nearly half an hour to calm her down and make a deal with every person in the place to not fire a gun as long as there was a young monkey present.

All I wanted was a bean burrito, but the fresh-faced robot at the counter kept saying “We don’t serve a ‘bean burrito’ ma’am, we have ‘The Alamo,’ ‘The Caravel,’ ‘The Howard Hughes,’ ‘The Montezuma,’ ‘The Conquistador,’ ‘The King Ranch,’ ‘The . . .’ I told him to shut up and I made us our food, gave him a fifty, and finally sat down to eat in peace. I breathed deeply, smiled largely at my new family, and found a center within myself. Jesus and I held hands and swore to kick all unhealthy habits that had gotten us through this rough patch so that we could really live like people who know nothing of compulsory corporate labor or the worldwide dragnet of banking institutions.

I distributed the food I’d made for them and was placing a burrito in Violet’s hand when another round of salutary gunfire filled the air and an impassioned little tribe of weanling Americans temporarily distracted by the commotion trampled over our table spilling themselves, ourselves, and all the contents of the table all over the place and injuring our monkey. From our place on the ground we could see the cowboy driving this herd, whose bouncing adipose and foaming face were positively on fire. He leapt into the air jumping high over the whole mess yelling “I’m Cortez, I’m Cortez you motherfuckers and I’ll skin you all alive!”

We ate on the road.