

The Ant and the Tsunami

The thick sound of palm on metal echoed through the empty aisles.

“Dumb machine,” the man said. He punctuated each word with a slap. “Stupid. Worthless. Machine.”

Dorota Cifuentes watched the man from behind her register. Fluorescent lights burned overhead, so bright that by the end of every shift, when she walked out of *Stop-N-Shop's* automatic doors and out into the warm night air that left a bitter taste in her throat, Dorota felt like she was stumbling out of a desert so hot the sun had blanched the sky.

“C'mon,” the man said.

He spat every word at the stainless steel box with the LCD screen. The box beeped and showed an error message in the face of his disgust, which angered the man even more, and he left smudges of grease where he gripped the box as if to throttle it into submission.

Dorota cleared her throat, and the man threw a half glance behind him, a glance that was at once vulnerable and threatening, a plea and a warning. He returned to wrestling with the self-checkout register, lowering his voice to try to cajole and coerce the machine.

Dorota tugged at her polyester uniform. Three years into the job and she still hadn't gotten used to the feeling of the uniform against her skin, which made her itchy no matter how many times she washed it, as if the clothing was driving small stakes just below the surface of her skin which she couldn't get at no matter how much she tried. She glanced at the digital

display blinking the day's count at her. Both of their counts, actually, hers and that of the silver machine which she was meant to keep sparkling and in working order even as it was pushing her out the door with one metal hand on the small of her back. Today had been better than most, but she was still a few dollars behind, and closing time was in a few minutes.

“Excuse me,” she said. “Excuse me sir.”

The man's ears perked up, and he doubled his efforts to get the machine to work. Shiny black letters stamped into a steel sign beamed *Stop-N-Shop's Principles* at Dorota's eye level.

1. GREET with a “SMILE”

Dorota arranged her face in an imitation of a customer-service-style-smile.

“I'd be happy to help you over here,” she said.

The man's movements grew more frantic; he shifted from foot to foot and screamed in a hoarse whisper at the machine until viscous strings of spittle hung from his lips. Finally, the machine beeped to life. His shoulders slumped with relief. He tossed the items into his reusable bag and walked out of the store as quickly as possible.

The display blinked the updated numbers at her slowly, insolently, she thought, as if it were on the side of her metallic, software-enhanced competition, like it wanted to remove all organic elements from the store and replace them with its binary kin. If that was the goal, it was well on its way.

Dorota got up from her stool, yawned and stretched, and went about closing up her station. The cleaning man, John, was squeegeeing something sticky that had spilled in aisle 4. They made eye contact for a moment and gave each other a solemn nod before quickly returning to their respective tasks, as if by spending too much time in the presence of the other they might be stained by their counterpart's prospects. Whatever prospects Dorota had were a far cry from

her expectations upon arrival in the sprawling, snarling city on the edge of the plains. Phone calls back home grew shorter and more strained. Dorota kept the conversation light, and her mother, Romina, fought to keep the worry out of her voice on the other end, so their talks had a thin, transparent quality. Each woman saw the other as they were at that moment—Romina perched on the edge of the worn wooden chair next to the phone, clutching the receiver with both hands, and Dorota pacing back and forth in her tiny apartment with her brow furrowed, trying to not allow the guilt at the fact that she hadn't sent any money home in three months, guilt that sat in her stomach like a stone, creep into her voice and remind her mother of her reliance on that money.

The door slid open with a whisper, and Dorota stepped out into the acrid air that the tile factory, a block away, spat out in a billowing stream from the giant exhaust stacks which looked, on days like that one, like pillars holding up the underbelly of clouds that smothered the city. The bus was full but quiet. People dressed like Dorota, in starched uniforms of gray or green or navy, sat on the hard plastic seats and gazed out of the windows or stared at nothing or closed their eyes and dozed, slumped against their neighbor, who bore it because last night it might've been them who had been too tired to keep their eyes open, as they crawled through the city. She got off and climbed the steps to her apartment, which was small but well-kept, and then got ready for bed, slid under the sheets and clicked off the light.

Sleep was slow in coming. The day's count kept flashing in her mind's eye. The monthly call with the store manager, who managed not just Dorota's store but nine others throughout the city, was in two days, and she wondered vaguely if that would be her last one as she slipped into sleep. Dreams overtook her, dreams that came to her every night but burned away like mist under

a midday sun when she opened her eyes, leaving only a vague impression, a feeling like a single piece missing in a ten thousand piece puzzle.

In Dorota's dream, the city was populated by her family members, some dead and some a thousand miles away. Their backs always seemed to be facing her, so Dorota would tap them on the shoulder, and they would turn around to reveal eyes that were milk-white, eyes without eyelids that looked out, unblinking, over endless waters. They would smile. Or, better said, they would bare their teeth, which turned out to be empty gums that spilled gouts of blood over their pale, bloodless lips and onto their chests. Dorota would pull back, horrified, and try to run, but the road had become steep like the side of a mountain and soft like a sand dune, so for every step she took, she slid back an equal amount, until, choking back tearless sobs, she stopped, the road or dune swallowed her up, and she woke with a start.

Outside the bus windows the next morning, the sunrise set the city's smog aflame, as if a torch had sparked a blaze that crept westward and devoured the waking metropolis. Dorota watched through eyes glazed with sleep and thought of the store, which set her teeth to grinding, a childhood habit she'd been unable to shake. She massaged her jaw and let the movement of the bus, bouncing and shaking through potholes half-filled with muddy water, lull her into a doze. At her stop (how many hundreds of times had she made this exact trip?), she got off, walked across the blacktop, the sun steaming off the night's thin film of water so her ankles were swathed in mist, and opened the store.

Inside, she stifled a yawn and glanced up at the red dot of the security camera, which stared back at her. Dorota bit down on her lip to stave off a wave of revulsion that churned the bile in her stomach and threatened to send the liquid out onto the gleaming white tile to be mopped up later by John. Customers started to filter in. Few of them, mostly older women, came

to Dorota's check-out line. The majority made a beeline for the automated register. The younger people usually threw a surreptitious glance at Dorota, a glance wracked with a nebulous guilt, although not so much guilt as to bring them to her line, as they walked quickly to the self-checkout machine. All the while, Dorota fell behind in the count. The gaps in the numbers were wide and growing wider these days.

The lights burned overhead. Sweat trickled down the back of Dorota's neck despite the air conditioning, a salt slick that raised goose pimples from her skin. The day wore on, and the gap widened. She thought about the next day's meeting with the store manager and about last month's conversation, which had been more warning than conversation. The manager spoke in a saccharine tone laced with a simpering condescension that grated even in memory. Her tone was sweet, but the message was cold: keep up, or else. *Or else* seemed to have arrived, Dorota thought, and she felt a strange mixture of relief and desperation. To not have the day's count seared into her mind at the end of every day, doubtless to emerge within the dreams she was fortunate enough to have slip away every morning, would be incredible. No more gnawing feeling in her belly before she had the chance to blink sleep from her eyes.

On the other hand, there was the fear of a thin bank account bleeding out to empty. Hunger, flesh melting from bone as she looked at herself wasting away in the mirror. And now, a new feeling, anger, rawer and more powerful than the others. Anger at the machines that had picked off her colleagues one by one. Even John, who made sure the store shone every morning, haunting the aisles until the early hours of the morning, did his work alongside an algorithm-powered metal cylinder. Anger at the store manager's smugness, which showed itself in the way her thin, bloodless lips curled up at the end of one of her monologues on store policy or hard work or customer service. Anger at the surveillance cameras' blinking red lights. The

anger swelled until it was all Dorota could do to bite down on her lip and keep herself from screaming.

On her way back home, without really meaning to, she found herself in a liquor store. She drank little, and almost never hard alcohol, but Dorota bought four bottles of high-proof vodka that she placed on the counter when she got home. She didn't smoke, but along with the vodka she'd purchased a pack of cigarettes and a lighter. When her head hit the pillow, she looked at her haul, which seemed perfectly at home despite the items' strangeness, and felt a curious strength that she hadn't felt in a long time.

The next day, in the storeroom, the store manager's image popped up on the crystal clear, 16K resolution screen. John was there, blinking a lot and looking confused, his skin so pale it was almost translucent. Ruby, the woman who split shifts with Dorota, was also there. She sat on the edge of her hard plastic chair and twisted the frayed string from which her keys dangled around her index fingers. Dorota was strangely calm, so calm that even the sight of the manager's mouth forming that serpentine smile left her unaffected. Her calm was unbroken when the manager talked about efficiencies and contributions to the business and numbers and in-store failings and automation and the future and they were all fired, although filtered through so many human resources trainings that Ruby furrowed her brow and raised her hand as if they were seated in a classroom instead of the dingy back room of a *Stop-N-Shop*.

"Ar-are we fired?" she asked the still-smiling figure on the screen.

The manager smiled wider and she spoke slowly, as if she were speaking to a child, repeating what she'd said and then nodding and finishing with, "So yes, my dear, you're fired," before the screen went blank and the three of them sat in silence.

For Ruby, it was a stunned silence. For John, the silence was business as usual. For Dorota, the silence was laced with the strength she'd found on the edge of sleep the night before. She nodded to her former colleagues, packed up the few things she'd brought to work, and walked out into the swirls of desert-born dust that danced across the parking lot.

In the early morning, before dawn started to lighten the sky, Dorota sat in the worn armchair across from the small tv set attached to the wall. The screen showed a store, her store, her former store, engulfed in flames.

"No news yet on what caused the blaze," said the newswoman, who was on site with the tower of fire behind her. A bit of ash spiraled down onto her shoulder, and she brushed it off.

Dorota looked over at the empty counter, and a small smile creased the ashen edges of her eyes.