a shop worker’s Christmas and other poems

By Paul Tanner

Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes… I find it quite exceptional in the way Paul Tanner carves out slices of life. In ‘a shop worker’s Christmas’ we find a loving wife in contrast to a disgruntled customer—both pinching. His proceeding poems follow a similar theme revealing how trying it can be in the service industry; and how cruel some people can act. I hope they have quelled some of his frustrations and purged some others’ thoughts. Courtesies are shared; delusions of superiority and servility are not. (Spacing and font size are poet’s own.) HS

a shop worker’s Christmas

we’re sitting cross-legged under the tree.
I can’t wait for my wife to see what I got her.

I reach for the present
I want her to open next
and my sleeve rides up,
showing a bruise by my elbow.

I stare at it …

what’s the matter? my wife asks me.
nothing, I say, handing her the present.
here, this one’s for you!

oooh, she says, taking it off me …

I try to live in the moment.
I am living in the moment

and in this moment
it’s Christmas day
and I have a beautiful wife

and my beautiful wife
is pinching at the corner
of the wrapping paper
that is wrapped around
the present I got her

pinching
just like
that customer pinched me
yesterday
when I told her
we’d ran out of turkeys,
when she pinched me by the elbow
as she told me
that I’d ruined her Christmas
and her kids would be upset
and it was all my fault
and was I happy with myself?
before she finally let go
of my arm
and stormed out
yelling
that I should be ashamed …

anyway:

I love it! my beautiful wife says, looking at the present

and we hug.

I live in the moment
and in this moment
my bruised arm
is around my beautiful wife
and I’m thinking
I should enjoy this moment
and every other moment
today
has to offer
because after all
I’m in work again tomorrow.

yeah, sure, why not

it’s like this every time I come in here! she says.

IT’S ALWAYS TERRIBLE CUSTOMER SERVICE!

what crime my co-worker had committed against her
I don’t know,
cos I was stacking shelves at the time –
maybe he didn’t laugh at her joke,
or look interested enough in her sob story,
or he dared to tell her he couldn’t reduce prices –
but whatever it was,
I could hear her resultant victim screams from across the store alright …

hours later
I ran across the road to get something to eat
and she was holding up the queue in there:
it’s like this every time I come in here! she was telling the worker.
IT’S ALWAYS TERRIBLE CUSTOMER SERVICE …

what crime had been committed against her

this time

I don’t know, but …

funny, isn’t it, how shops always hire

the worst servers to serve customers?

no wonder she’s so angry:

it’s too much of coincidence

to ignore:

maybe we really are all picking on her.

snap

the customer reaches over the counter

and snatches the money out of your hand,

scratching you

deep enough

to make you bleed

and you say excuse me,

I was going to hand you your change

if you’d have just waited another second

and they say
you can’t talk to me like that!
and make a complaint

so your boss reprimands you
for being aggressive to a customer
and when you suggest that
maybe this is not fair
she accuses you of being
passive aggressive towards her

so you go job centre
where they say they can’t help you
and when you dare to ask
why not?
they hold their hands up
and wheel backwards in their wheelie chair
saying woah, wait a minute,
they have the right to work
without abuse or threats, you know!
and the security ape comes over
to escort you out

and then you’re on the street
and someone asks you if you can spare
“the price of a cup of tea”
and you tell them you can’t
and they say alright,
there’s no need to be so stuck up about it!
their bellows echoing across the street
as you walk away:
bully! they cry. heartless tory!

and then you’re on a bench
watching all your victims
waltz by

until someone comes over
and tells you
this is my bench

and finally
you snap:
a red curtain comes down behind your eyes
and with it
the need to shred through society
until someone shoots you down
and then it’ll all be done with
for you
at least.
there’s no punchline here,
this is just how it is now:
the red curtain wafting
behind your eyes,
waiting for the final act

any moment now.

frothed town centre emotional broth

been queueing for half an hour!
she says, plonking her stuff down
on my conveyor belt.
you need more tills, you do!

yeah, I agree with her
and start scanning her stuff …

“yeah”? she says. that’s it, is it? just “yeah?”

what do you want me do about it?
I ask her. you want me to widen the building
and construct more checkouts stations?
then she made a complaint
about my “attitude”

so they had to take me off the tills
and drag me into the back office
to sign a form
agreeing to the vague charge
that I was a “bad person”
or whatever it was supposed to prove,

while the rest of the staff
struggled with the queues
a man down.

bet the customers loved that.

THE POET SPEAKS: “I honestly don’t know what the hell I’m doing. Obviously, a lot of my stuff has a certain political, class-conscious angle, but ultimately, this is the Muse, and one doesn’t go dissecting the Muse: what if I get cured of it? Then I’m staring 40 in the face and earning minimum wage, without a creative outlet! Sod that. So it’s art-imitating-life-imitating-art kinda deal, and I’m locked in for life - today’s social setup has seen to that. Still, thanks for the material, ya bastards.”