

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!

ooh, 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 to 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 an 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."*

AUTHOR'S BIO: Novel 'Jobseeker' doing alright on Amazon UK. Shortlisted for the Erbacce 2020 Poetry Prize. Latest collection “Shop Talk: Poems for Shop Workers” is published by Penniless Press.