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Part of the Job

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"Part of the Job"

I work in this bank. Actually it's a savings and loan institution. That savings and loan part is important. We do more loans than savings. This is why I personally have not been able to start any savings of my own, I guess. I own a car and my clothes and some furniture. That's it. A dollar can only go so far you know and here dollars just don't make it into the teller's paychecks. It's a job though. And a job is a job. I mean it's better to be working than not. And we do get to use our minds here every once and a while. People, especially the Senior Citizens and our regular customers, bring us chocolates and gift certificates and things at Christmas. And we're pretty close here. But sometimes it's a real drag just being here every day and thinking about balancing and maybe getting robbed and trying not to offend really rude customers and things. Marybeth keeps us together here though. She has a real good sense of humor.

Marybeth tells us little stories just about every Saturday morning, standing there in the lobby with a stapler for a microphone while Cindy makes the coffee and we are getting ready to open up here—

Oh, you don't say much on Saturday mornings and your Dad gives your brothers a five and tells them to go to the store and buy him some orange juice concentrate. You know he knows they're only four and six and that they don't know the difference between orange and lemon lime concentrate because they don't even know how to read yet, and that four and six is too young to be sent to the store on Saturday mornings alone anyways. So you take the five and them with you and go to the store and buy the orange juice concentrate and them packs of gum and you sing songs and look for worms on the way home.

Yes, she'll go on and on with something like that if it's going on six and someone still can't balance by, let's say, seventy-six cents or so, or if one of us drops our tray when we're getting it out of the vault and about one hundred dollars worth of coin just flies all over the place. She tells us little things like that, especially on Saturday mornings, because if she didn't we'd all go crazy here. Who likes to work on a Saturday morning when you've already worked Monday through Friday before? She cheers us up with stories like that. She keeps us going here.

"Yes, we've got to keep going," Marybeth says. Or, "Tut tut it looks like rain," whenever Matthew comes to the office. Matthew is our personnel manager, assistant v.p. here, for the whole company. Every other month or so we have to get to the office an hour early or stay an hour

late to tell Matthew how we feel about working here. He gives us these confidential questionnaires about our working conditions or if anyone would go to a company picnic. Common sense things that don't have to be handled so secretly. These questionnaires are all multiple choice like — I would most likely attend a company recreational function (e. g. picnic or potluck) during a) the spring b) the summer c) the winter CIRCLE ONE. Or, they'll say — I am happy with my working conditions (e. g. manager or company recreational functions) a) most of the time b) some of the time c) never CIRCLE ONE.

"Ignorant," Marybeth says after Matthew leaves. "That pretty boy thinks we're ignorant. I circle all C's this time, how about you?"

That man shows up here just about every day now, regular as the mailman, since we got robbed that second time. Nervewracking. "Just seeing how you girls are doing," or, "I just can't keep away from your pretty faces," he says.

It makes you kind of nervous having him around checking up on us that's for sure. You pray that Mr. Simpson or Mrs. Coughlin (two of our problem customers) don't come to the bank while he's here because they won't let any of us handle their transaction. No, they have to speak with Martha, our manager here. If she's closing a loan or counting money or talking with Matthew, those two will stand at your window and whine and complain and threaten to close their accounts out until you have to interrupt Martha and she hates to be interrupted, believe me, especially if she's with Matthew.

"It's her job to deal with these problems," Marybeth says and she'll walk over and interrupt Martha every time, no matter if the problem is at my window or Cindy's.

Marybeth rarely has problems at her window. Not for a long time, that's for sure. She's good. She keeps things going. She'll be in the middle of a customer and he'll be telling her about seventeen different things he wants done and the phone will ring and she'll just make a "T" with her hands and say "time out" and cut him off right in the middle of a word. And she'll say it in such a way that that customer will shut up right then, immediately, not say another word just stand there and maybe just light a cigarette or play with the little plastic plants until Marybeth finishes with that call.

Yes, Marybeth always surprises me. Cool, she's calm, always, except when we got robbed that second time. My my the way she acted then surprised me. A full-fledged emotional breakdown, just like you read about in *Ladies Home Journal*. 'Brenda Davis: Those Mysterious Emotions, My Bitter Breakdown — a personal testimony' I never expected anything like that to happen to Marybeth.

"I freaked," Marybeth says, shaking her head. "I fucking freaked." We were on the news that second time. Hit two days in a row. Coincidence big time.

The company takes us out to lunch when we get robbed. They kind of try to bribe us and calm us down that way.

"Life goes on," Matthew says. The first time they took us to Sampsons, monogrammed butter and all—a top place. We were all joking around that first time and Marybeth used her fork as a microphone and cheered us all up with one of her little stories—

Oh, you don't say much when your Dad starts to burn orange juice concentrate cans, 1/2 gallon milk cartons, toilet paper rolls in the fireplace in the living room. You just put the screen up when he goes to make a screwdriver and you keep your little brothers from poking all the pick-up sticks into it. You like that game and they've already burned the black stick which makes it kind of hard to play the game because that's the object—to get the black one. You just pull them away from the fire and hope they don't start to whine because your Dad has a head-ache and he's made the dinner and he likes to read the paper by the fire and he likes things quiet when he sits by the fire and reads his paper.

She told us something like that in the middle of the restaurant and we all laughed—even Martha and Matthew. Yes, she cheers us up with stories like that, keeps us going.

"You should write songs," Cindy says in her little possum voice. "You really should Marybeth."

The next day, the second time we got robbed, the company took us to Kentucky Fried Chicken. Finger Lickin' Good. All Marybeth could eat was one of those little styrofoam cups of coleslaw. She didn't try to cheer anyone up that time. She was quiet, subdued. The whole time we were sitting in that little orange booth I was expecting her to hold up one of the little plastic forks and tell us a story or something to cheer us up. She didn't say anything except "Shit, I wish I had worn my blue sweater," after we walked out of the restaurant and were filmed by all three local news networks.

Yes, Marybeth always surprises me, she surprises all of us. She drives this beat up old Cutlass around like it's the best car in the world. The back end is all smashed in like a can of corn or something that you find in the discount basket at the grocery. She calls it her Old Gutless.

"Half his stomach's hanging out, but he sure as hell gets me to work on time," she says.

It's below freezing right now and Marybeth doesn't have a winter jacket. "Shit, I haven't had a winter coat in two years," she says. "I grew up in the snowbelt. I'm more than comfortable. Hell, Eskimos run around nude in this kind of weather," she says.

"Does this look like an igloo?" Martha asks her.

No one offers her their old jackets anymore, but we do kind of wonder. It really is cold. Whether Eskimos handle this kind of weather in the raw is beside the point.

Most of us are really kind of casual about making it to work on time, except for Cindy who's always early. The rest of us (actually just Martha and I) give and take five or ten minutes like we don't really need this job. It's just something to do like going to a movie or out to dinner or something. And I do need it believe me. Car payment, student loan payment (beauty schools are a waste), rent, cigarettes. I need it alright. I mean my parents can only give me so much for so long.

Marybeth, I don't see how she handles it though. Every morning she drives all the way across town in that car, drops her kids off at the daycare and still makes it to the bank at exactly eight-fifteen. Never early and certainly never late. And she has to dress those kids and get them ready too. They are little, four and two. Hassles, but she gets here and always with a smile like she's waking up from one of the best nights of her life. She's told me more than once that you can't bring what's bothering you to the office. "Here you got to think about the people you're working with, not the bullshit crap that might be going on with the rest of your life." She'll say that if we're bitchy and ignoring each other.

Marybeth has experienced a lot. Thirty-two, two kids, two marriages, saw the Doors, Janis Joplin, lived in Japan for three years, art school for a while. A lot. But she was the one who got the emotional breakdown when we got robbed that second time. The rest of us were fairly — reasonably — mellow about the whole thing, even little Cindy and she had the worst of it. At least that's how the rest of us appeared to be. But Marybeth was a case. She was a total case when it happened. What a mess she was.

"I freaked," she says to customers when they ask us things like "What did it feel like?" or "Were you scared?" Marybeth still can't think of something good to tell them. "I freaked," she says. Or, if the customer is a Senior Citizen, she says, "I experienced an emotional breakdown."

"Lord have mercy," the Senior Citizens say. Or, "Oh my laws." Then they'll shut up and just look at her really embarrassed and sad, like maybe they had asked about her marriage and she was divorced. They just don't expect Marybeth to say that.

Robbery number one was basic, just like in the manual. No guns, no masks, no customers getting shot in the back, no hysterics. Just a simple, "Give me your money," at one window — Cindy's — and that was all.

Robbery number two was different, unique, ingenious, movie material. They were hiding in this closet the whole time, climbed in through an air vent or something — we still don't know. The closet is in the back room where we count the money after Brinks brings it in. It's cluttered and musty — filthy — back there. It even smells old. The carpet back there feels like rotten fruit or something. After you go into that backroom, whether it's to count the money or look over an old day's work, you come out just dripping OLD. And the feeling doesn't really go away until you've been on the line for a good two or three hours. I try not to go back there at all. Being back there reminds me of being in my grandmother's house and she was so shrivled and senile when she died — it's depressing. Besides that, it's just eerie, spooky back there. A dungeon. I've told everyone that I have asthma and that I can't spend much time at all in dusty places that possibly might irritate my condition — doctor's orders. I do smoke, but everyone gives me the benefit of the doubt anyways. Marybeth usually goes back there to count the money.

"Hell, I spent three of the best years of my life living in a basement. Like back there. Brings back good memories," she tells us.

Marybeth didn't find them first though. It was Cindy. Cindy always gets to the office first. Her husband works downtown and the bank's way over on the east side. He drops her off at about a quarter till eight and we don't have to be here until eight-fifteen. He never lets her have the car and drop him off first either (maybe she doesn't ask; I really don't know). She never has any money for lunch or anything either. She just sits in our gray lunchroom and flips through old bridal magazines or files her nails or something like that. She gets to work early, opens the vault, waters the plants, makes coffee, changes the date on the calendar — things like that. I don't know why she went in the backroom that morning, she doesn't really like it either, but she still obviously must have gone back there.

Cindy and Mark just got married. It was a have-to, I guess, but she lost the baby. Lost it late. She didn't say much about it when it happened. She kept right on coming to work early and minding her own business. "I guess I must not have been ready for a child," was all she said. "We couldn't have afforded it anyways." She was going to name the baby Patricia or Patrick, whichever it was. She had this coffee mug that said

PAT on it in brown letters. It was her good-luck-baby-mug, she told us. She kept right on drinking her coffee out of that mug, even after she lost the kid, until Martha threw a file by her window and broke it. Cindy still drinking out of that mug sort of gave everyone the creeps, but no one ever said anything. No, she's too good with the customers.

When Martha and I got to the office that morning after we were robbed that first time, I think I kind of had the feeling something was wrong again. I really do. Sometimes I can just tell if something is going to happen like you can just sort of tell if you're pregnant, regardless if you're getting late or not. Martha had to bring me to work because my car died on me, and my boyfriend couldn't take me because it was his day off and he really needs his sleep. The whole place was locked and Martha said, "Where the hell is Cindy?", like Cindy is required to get here early every morning, let alone that she had been hit the day before. I hate coming to work with Martha, it just about ruins my whole day.

I had to hurry to the bathroom to put on my nylons. It's in the dress code. They don't care what the women wear as long as part of it includes nylons. We all joke about the polyester skirts — the only things we can afford really ("We all look like old women at a prayer meeting," Marybeth always says) but nylons are serious business. No messing around with them. You better have them on or you might as well not even get your money out.

Well, when I got out of the bathroom, Cindy still wasn't here. That was odd. She's nervous for the whole day if she comes in after eight. I asked Martha if she called or anything because you're always reading things in the paper or hearing on the news how people get in wrecks on the way to work and things and no one knows about it until the end of the day.

"Her damned car probably broke down too," was all Martha said, puffing away on one of her Virginia Slims. Then she opened the paper and started on the crossword. That always kind of irritates me. We all like to do the crossword and Martha knows it. Cindy usually makes Xeroxes for all of us, but if Martha can get the paper first, she'll turn and start the damned puzzle first thing. Marybeth asked her to make copies once and Martha damned near suspended her for three days without pay (I didn't even know they could do that). "I humbly beg your pardon," Martha had said. "I do hold the authority position around here, do I not?" She's one of the few woman managers in the whole company. I guess that puts her under a lot of pressure. She's on her way to the top though. What can I say?

"Yeah, you've come a long way baby," Marybeth says under her breath when Martha pulls that crossword crap.

By the time Marybeth pulled in (eight-fifteen exactly) I really was wondering about Cindy. Martha was wondering too. She didn't want to show it, but I could tell. She's damn proud of the fact that her branch has the best attendance record in the whole company. She had already called Cindy's apartment twice and didn't get an answer.

"Open the vault," she told me when Marybeth walked in the door, so I did.

Marybeth and I got our money out — that's when they came out of the backroom. There were two of them and Cindy. She was sort of trembling like she does when the computer screws up and the customers get bitchy, but other than that she seemed okay. They told Cindy to get her money out and they sort of pushed her towards the vault, and then they made all of us put everything from our trays on the counter. Marybeth just sort of stood there and said, "oh shit oh shit oh shit." She couldn't even move, let alone get in her tray and pull the money out.

"That was the beginning of the freak," Marybeth says now. "Immobilization."

Martha had to come over and empty Marybeth's tray. She kept on staring the men right in the face with this little smirk on her face like she was actually enjoying the challenge of the experience. She had to be nervous as hell, but no, she just stood there proud as the statue of liberty, the whole time flapping her knee like crazy against the two alarm buttons under Marybeth's window.

I couldn't look at the men. I still couldn't say who they were if they walked in this door this very second. I knew Martha would probably bitch, but I couldn't help it. I don't know how many times she's told us that if we were ever robbed, we were to maintain direct eye contact with the robber. "Do not ever, do not ever, let his eyes get away from you," she says.

Marybeth asked her why in the hell you'd want to look somebody in the eye if they were imposing on your person and violating you — something like that during a security meeting once. "You maintain human contact. If you look him in the eye, he will start to identify with you on a human level. Eye contact creates a human bond, Marybeth. He knows you and can feel you as a human being, he will not hurt you," Martha said.

"If some bastard's pointing a gun at me, I sure as hell am not going to stand there and smile and tell him I want to identify on a human level, hell no, Martha," Marybeth said.

"Good answer," Cindy said in her little possum voice.

"It's in the security code, Marybeht. You're to follow it as best you can," Martha said to all of us. "It's part of the job."

I didn't know if I should stick the bait and the dye bomb on the counter, but they said everything, lock, stock and barrel, so I did it. Cindy had hers up there. Martha had Marybeth's up there too. Thank God we all did that, no use in having one of us singled out. You think about these things when you're getting robbed.

Next thing they were brushing along the counter and catching the loose money in these shoe boxes. The bastards knew about the dye bombs. I didn't realize that anyone other than banking personnel knew about the bombs, but those two sure as hell did. That's why Martha says they were professionals, obviously.

Now this is the part that really caused the freak, Marybeth thinks. This one guy, he was the smaller of the two, was brushing the money with the same hand that was holding the gun. Now that was stupid. Next thing the gun was going off and the bullet was whizzing right past Marybeth's window. The bullet blew right through Marybeth's pencil holder and the pencils and pens just whipped all over the place. Marybeth just sort of melted right then and Martha had to hold her up. I just about bit my tongue in half when it happened. Cindy said, "Oh my God, my God, do not let them kill us," like she was saying the Pledge of Allegiance or explaining to cutomers what they need to open a NOW account, talking like she was just bored to death. Martha just kept on standing there like the same old Statue of Liberty herself. That woman never flinches.

I think we all thought we were going to die (what else were we to think?) but they just told us not to move (do you think we would have?) and took their boxes and ran out the back door. The whole thing probably lasted a minute and a half, two at the most.

This is the real freak. As soon as they were out the door, Marybeth crawled under her window like those little Chinese kids you see holding rice bowls in magazines. We couldn't get her to move for anything.

"Fetal position," Marybeth says, "Phase two."

Cindy went around and gathered up all the scattered pens and pencils. Martha stuck the red security alert sign up in the window and told us not to say anything about the robbery to each other until we had given the report to the police. Then she fixed her hair and stood by the door to wait for Matthew and the police.

"What about Marybeth?" I asked her.

"Don't worry about that, just go and try to organize some of those boxes and shit in the back room. The auditors will be here in a few minutes," she said, still standing as composed as Mother Liberty herself.

Fine. I was going to bring up my asthma, but I didn't.

Still she said, "You smoke, just go back there," and then to Cindy she said, "for God's sake Cindy, don't touch the counter, fingerprints, fingerprints, they'll need to get fingerprints."

Cindy started to go back there with me, but Martha stopped her and told her to take care of Marybeth who had become practically hysterical — sobbing and everything.

"Phase three," Marybeth says. "Loss of control of emotions."

The backroom was a mess — worse than usual. They had knocked a couple boxes over just for the hell of it. Deposit tickets and things were scattered all over and I could just imagine these enemy propaganda pamphlets falling from an airplane or something, like in movies. I did the best I could at cleaning up the crap, but it would take years to make the auditors happy. Cindy's good-luck-baby-mug was back here all glued together. It was sort of hidden in the corner with a couple old magazines. I thought for sure that the auditors would totally bitch about having those things back there where we keep the records, but they didn't say a damned thing about them.

Instead, they made a huge list of ways to improve our filing, and Martha is still going to these meetings about the importance of financial institutions keeping, immaculate, precise records and things. It's made our job a lot harder, I know that. She comes back from those meetings with an expression on her face that is the closest to the way the Wicked Witch of the West looked when Dorothy poured the water on her that I've ever seen. She is much more picky and just about flies through the roof if we leave something at our window or don't fill out a deposit ticket the exact way that the manual says to.

Right after Marybeth got back from the vacation she had to take two weeks after the robbery because Martha said she must be having personal problems to act the way she did — obviously — and that she couldn't deal with those things on office time, she asked Martha why in the hell we'd want to waste our time writing the amount of money being deposited three times on those stupid tickets just because there are three spaces. "It's in the ticket writing procedure, Marybeth, you're to follow it the best you can," Martha had said to all of us, exhaling smoke. "It's part of the job."

Cindy's really meticulous about the whole thing. Marybeth always says, "Shit, I feel like I am in kindergarden," or something like that. Yesterday she told a customer that she was sorry his transaction was taking so long, but that her manager makes her write everything three times because she doesn't work that well with numbers. He kind of laughed, but it was a nervous laugh. People act that way when you're working with their money.

"It makes the world go round," Marybeth says.

"People do the most awful things to get it," Cindy always says, especially after she spent all that time in the back room with those bastards. Marybeth counted the number of times Cindy said that particular expression in a single day once. Seventeen. Cindy never really says much about being robbed or anything, but you can bet money that she'll say her expression at least two or three times in a day.

"It's filthy," I always say, "and so damned tempting."

"Oh lord won't you buy me a Mercedes Benz," Marybeth says in her Janus Joplin voice.

"We were hit two days in a row, unbelievable," Martha says to customers. "Totally unexpected," she says. "But we all (polite cough) handled it quite well."

Marybeth starts stamping her teller stamp really hard and making a lot of casual office noise when Martha starts saying things like that.

"You should write songs, really Marybeth," Cindy says. "You even have rhythm."

"It makes the world go round," Marybeth says.

"You'd better get used to handling thousands upon thousands every day," Martha told me, leaning back in her chair, dragging on her cigarette, when I first started working here. "We're not talking pennies."

Yes, we handle it alright. We handle a lot at this place. We have to I guess. I mean a job is a job you know. Marybeth says that when she wins the lottery she's going to start a home for wayward bank tellers. And we're going to sit around and do crosswords and never get up before eleven on Saturday mornings. And we'll never have to go to another security meeting or anything or worry about getting robbed again. It's good for us to think about that. It makes us smile a lot. And, according to Martha, it's damned important for us to smile here. "It's in the manual," she says. "It's part of the job."