

A Visit to Costco

The foreman sends all us machinists home a few hours early. Some screw up in ordering parts we needed. Without pay, of course, but what the hell, a free afternoon. I call the wife, and she wants some stuff from Costco. Which I pick up, and still have a few minutes to kill before heading home.

So here I am, wandering the books aisle, just browsing, when a voice, soft, high-pitched, whispers:

'Scuse me. 'Scuse me. Please help me get out of here.

Maybe a child, strapped in its cart by a mom off in search of clothing? Or a kid sitting under some counter while the mother searches for it frantically? I look around. No abandoned carts nearby. No abandoned children. Stooping down and peering under counters, nothing. Must have overheard someone in another part of the store.

Moving on, I hear the voice again, softer but more insistent.

'Scuse me. 'Scuse me. Will someone help me get out?!

I glance around. Still no one in sight. Back to where I started, bending over the books, asking softly,

Any one here? Calling for help?

A response.

Oh thank you! Please, help me. I'm trapped.

But, where are you?

In a box.

The whole display table is stacked with boxed sets of books.

Which box?

I don't know! I didn't choose this.

I start picking up boxes, one by one, shaking them gently. Third try's the one.

Stop! You're hurting me.

Sorry.

I'm holding a set of two books by The BossMan, labelled, "The BossMan Sez.". Their titles are 'Stealing While Dealing' and 'Having Your Way With Anyone.'

Please hurry! I can hardly breathe.

The box is sealed in that damn plastic wrapping, impossible for me to open. I search for a Costco employee.

I can't get this set open. Would you cut the plastic, please?

He looks dubious.

"There's an open box on the table, if you want to see one of the books."

Just cut it open, please.

"Okay, okay. I shouldn't but ... let's just say, if I cut it, you buy it."

I nod. He pulls out a box-cutter, slices the plastic.

Thanks.

Back to books section, box in hand. No one around, so I carefully pull out the books. A tiny figure, two-inches tall, crawls out after them. I'm surprised she doesn't have wings.

Thank God! Where was I? Where am I?

I gesture to the table.

Costco. In that set of books. Must have been awfully crowded in there.

Nah. They leave lots of space, to make it look like you're getting more. But I was running out of air.

I realize I'm standing here chatting with a two-inch tall fairy.

Well, I'm glad I heard you.

Me, too. Which set was I in?

"The BossMan Sez." In with 'Stealing While Dealing' and 'Having Your Way With Anyone'.

I should have known. That bastard! Having his way with me.

Whoa. I never miss one of The Bossman's shows. He's right on about how life is for us working guys.

You know The BossMan?

Know him? I work for him. Or did. He's the son of a bitch put me in that box! Him and that witch of his!

Sounds like she's really pissed. At both of them. On the other hand, she actually knows The BossMan.

Wow. Never met anyone who's actually seen The BossMan in the flesh. What's he like? What do you do for him?

Did. Media Communications Specialist.

That sounds suspicious.

Aren't you a little "short" for media communications? For jockeying a keyboard, or showing up on TV? Guess they could zoom in on you.

I was the same size as you, before that SOB fired me.

That would be my job of a lifetime, working for The BossMan. You must have really screwed up.

That earned me a withering look, from a person two inches tall.

I guess I did, if laughing at the wrong time is screwing up. Sounds like you don't know anything about The BossMan except what his hype merchants put out.

Now just a minute, pipsqueak. I know that The BossMan really cares about people like me, hard working people! He understands us and we trust him. You shouldn't be badmouthing him, just 'cause he fired you, probably with good reason.

Geez! Why couldn't some reasonable person rescue me?

That hurt. Everyone agrees I'm a reasonable person. Even my wife says I'm reasonable, for a guy.

No reason for you to start insulting me.

Then listen to my side before you start insulting me. You sound just like The BossMan.

Feisty little bundle. Never misses a chance to take a poke at him.

The BossMan doesn't insult people.

You're not worth talking to. Put me back in the box.

I can't do that. These books are coming home with me. What would the wife and boys say to finding a loud-mouth pixie in the box? Better to just hear her out, then leave her here.

No way! ... Just tell me your story.

You'd listen?

Of course.

Okay. But no comments. Only questions, or I'm done.

She's done? Who rescued who around here?

I started working for The BossMan Enterprises about a year ago, in the Headquarters Building. As a Message Specialist. Fancy title for a mailroom clerk. The building's just what you see on TV, outside all black metal and dark glass, elegant marble lobby, plush executive suite in the penthouse. Super ostentatious.

Come on. The BossMan has earned his right to the best.

I said no comments! ... All the other floors are a crowded mess. Small rooms, narrow hallways, dirty toilets. I'm stuffed into a tiny mail room with three other 'Specialists'.

Sounds like any big corporation.

One more remark from you and I'm through. ... And there are lots of rules and "understandings." The most important being, never let The BossMan or his gang of kiss-ass sycophants see you. There's a whole system to prevent that, like warning calls five minutes before they're passing through your area.

One time that they call, he doesn't show up, so after two hours I slip out to the drinking fountain. Then I hear them coming. Try to duck back to my room, but too late, he sees me.

Why did you take the chance? ... That's a question, by the way.

A stupid question. It was a hot day, air conditioning failure, I was thirsty.

How come you get to make comments like that and I don't?

She pauses, smiles at me.

Sorry. You're right. Sauce for the goose and all that.

Anyway, The BossMan points at me as I'm closing the mail room door, yells,

"Who's that girl?"

One of his gang replies,

"Don't worry, sir. We'll have her out of here in an hour. She won't bother your again."

He turns on the speaker,

'No, you idiot. I want to see more of her. Make her one of those ... whatever-they're-called. And don't let the bitch find out.'

The group moves on. Next day, so do I, to a top floor office with three other women. We are the Media Content Specialists and, strangely enough, we all look and dress alike. Maybe not so strange, given that our little group is The BossMan's harem-in-waiting.. Nothing to do but just sit there, 'til one of us gets a call to be "of service".

That sure doesn't match what I've heard about The Bossman and his family..

Everyone knows The BossMan loves his wife and kids. She's on most every show. They were childhood sweethearts back in Sicily. You can feel it in the way they look at each other.

That's only when they're on air. Who do you think the 'bitch' is?" He's no better than any man. Worse than most.

Another gratuitous swipe, but the tale's getting interesting.

So when did this job change of yours happen?

About three weeks ago. Two weeks of nothing happening, except us ladies sitting there telling lies to each other. Then, out of the blue, we get a call. Up to the penthouse with paper and pencil, all of us. Some kind of important meeting.

I mean, who uses paper and pencil these days? Everything's on tablets. But of course we freshen up and appear as directed.

Here we go. Finally..

Stepping inside, I glance around the room. In a back corner, The BossMan's wife sits and looks at us over. She fixes her hostile gaze on me, until I shiver and drop eye contact.

The BossMan launches into a tirade.

“What the Hell's the matter with you guys? Can't you do anything?”

“Viewers are down! Likes are down! Sales are down! You're not delivering! This won't do!”

“Tonight's broadcast is going to be special. I'm promising them whatever they want to like us again. You know. The like button. Thumbs up. Click PURCHASE.

“Your job is to tell me what I need to promise. Whatever it takes to buy back their support. Two hours you've got. So get snapping.”

The BossMan points at me.

“And you, write down every idea that's proposed, and who says it.

The BossMan smiles, almost a smirk.

“We'll meet later and go over your notes.”

I feel a sharp jab in the back of my head. Without even turning, I know it's his wife, glaring at me. I almost faint from the pain.

A stunned silence in the room. Then a voice,

“There's too many have quit us already, Boss. We can't afford to pay 'em all off.”

That's Shorty, The BossMan's bookkeeper forever. Called Shorty 'cause he's so tiny, and wrinkled. He's the only one dares call The BossMan 'Boss'.

The BossMan responds in his usual gracious way,

“Shut up, Shorts! You're just a bean counter, no imagination. Building market share is never cheap.”

Another voice pops up,

“Yeah, shut up Shorty. You know better than to argue with The BossMan. He’s always right.”

That from Bebe, the biggest kiss-ass in the gang. Views himself as chief henchman. Rumor has it he spends most of his time politicking to become the next The BossMan. Nobody much likes him. They say ‘BB’ means ‘Big Butt.’

“Right, Bebe. This is my call. I’m promising to give them what they want, and I always keep my promises.”

That’s when things get exciting. And I get fired.

At last.

First, the smell of smoke. I look around and see nothing. Then I notice The BossMan's trousers. His cuffs are smoldering, little flames curling up. I laugh to myself and think 'Liar, liar, pants on fire.' But I must have I spoken out loud, because The BossMan points at me and says,

“You’re fired!”

But Sir, your pants are on fire. He looks down,

“Somebody do something!”

Nobody moves until I yell, ‘Get a fire extinguisher!.’ A sudden rush to the door, Bebe pushing his way to the front, returns with the machine, pulls the lock, squeezes the handle. Nothing happens. Like everything else in this place, it isn’t being maintained.

More flames. The BossMan screams,

“Help me!”

As if by instinct, everyone in the room draws together in a circle around The BossMan. Everyone except the wife and me. Synchronized like a well-rehearsed dance group, they face in or out, as appropriate, drop their pants, and extinguish the flames.

I think to myself. ‘What a stink!.’ Again, The BossMan hears me.

“There's no stink here!”

The henchmen echo in unison.,

“There’s no stink here.”

Why can't I keep my thoughts to myself? Too late for that now. Laughing out loud this time, I proclaim ‘You bunch sound like ‘The Emperor’s New Clothes’.

This girl’s got a gutsy attitude. Not that I’ll admit that to her..

That was a pretty stupid thing to do.

The BossMan would agree with you. He points at me and says in a very soft voice,

“Get that bitch out of here. Wait! Even better, you take care of her, darling. Stuff her in a box.”

His wife cackles. Despite not wanting to, my head turns to look at her. And I’m knocked to the ground by the force of her gaze. Il Malocchio. This time I do faint. The next thing I know, here I am. And that's the whole story.

And I’m supposed to believe all this?

That’s quite a story. Wouldn’t believe a word of it if you weren’t right here telling me.

But I am. And you’re listening. Now we’ve got to get out of here. Pick me up and let’s go.

We? Better if you just hide somewhere in the store overnight, then just walk out in the morning.

She stamps her feet at me.

Walk out like this? I wouldn’t get halfway to the exit without somebody stepping on me, or running me over with their cart. Let’s get moving. Pick me up!

So I do, or at least I start too. As soon as I touch her, a shock ripples through my body. Not unpleasant at all. In fact, better than pleasant. I can see she feels it too. I let go of her waist.

What the hell is that?

Don't know, but I feel like a chick breaking out of its shell.. First time I've been free since I woke up in that box. Thank you. Let's go!

I don't think so. Whatever that was, you're starting to get taller. Half an inch or more already. By tomorrow, you'll be full-grown, just like you had an 'Eat Me' cake. Best you find yourself a big enough hiding space, and you'll be fine.

Wait a damn minute! You can't just walk away from me. Like Confucius says, if you save someone's life, you're responsible for them forever.

Forever? The Hell I Am! What gave you that crazy idea?

I hear a collective gasp. Five or six people are standing around us, keeping their distance. Including the guy with the box-cutter, which he's holding with the blade extended. Guess I'm getting louder and louder, and they can't see her down among the boxes. No cellphone in sight, so they probably think I'm psychotic. Not good. I pull out my phone and wave it at them.

Sorry. The conversation turned a little fierce, there. Nothing to worry about. I'm out of here in a minute or so, anyway. Okay?

They slowly turn away, not entirely convinced but not their problem.

Speaking more softly, to her,

Okay, okay, we'll make something work. I'll take you out with me.

Truth is, she's that quirky-spunky type I always go for. Could be fun knowing her, when she's back to full size.

That's great! Thank you. ... Hey, I don't even know your name. I'm Missy.

We exchange little waves.

I'm Jacob. Call me Jake. Missy's a cute name. It fits you.

Nice to meet you, Jake. You're kind a cute too, but let's skip the flirting shit until we're out of here.

Cuts right to the point, doesn't she? Guess I'll play along. ... But I'd best take the books. Don't want trouble with the box-cutter guy. I drop them into my cart with the earlier purchases.

Ready to go?

I pick her up gently, hand around her body, and bring her up to eye level. Another shock runs through me. Our eyes meet.

Into my glasses pocket with you, Missy, and we're out of here. As long as you don't set off any alarms, we should be okay.

Not to worry, big boy.

Silly grins at each other, as if we're getting away with something.

I'm not beholden to you, you know.

And I'm sure as hell not beholden to you.

We share the twinkles in our eyes.

Then I guess we're beholden to each other.

Sounds good to me.

As we start toward the checkout stand, there's the box-cutter guy, making sure that I'm finally on my way out. I give him a nod and a cheery smile. He looks away.

When we reach checkout, the clerk says,

“Thank you for shopping at Costco. Did you find everything you were looking for?”

I laugh. Missy giggles faintly in my pocket. What can I say but,

And more! Believe me, you never know what you'll find at Costco.