

MERRY CHRISTMAS

Written by

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Based on *Rainbow Fish* by Marcus Pfister

*GWEN is a retail worker. She makes minimum wage, if that.
CAROLE, to quote Heathers, is a mythic bitch.*

INT. A DEPARTMENT STORE. NIGHT.

A few days before Christmas. The shoppers drown in a wave of frenzied fear. The workers float like Ophelia in a stagnant pool of apathy. Nobody's having a good time, to say the least. Lights flicker. Tinny Christmas music fills the thinning air.

GWEN has just finished checking out a customer. She waits for the next customer to approach, as they do in a steady stream, usually.

GWEN looks up at CAROLE expectantly.

CAROLE glares at GWEN.

GWEN
...Hello, there. Can I help you?

Beat.

CAROLE
Yes. You can.

CAROLE huffily approaches the register and throws a pile of clothes on the counter.

GWEN
Lot of great stuff you found here.

CAROLE
Yes.

Silence. CAROLE taps her foot.

CAROLE (CONT'D)
Are you going to -

GWEN looks up from scanning.

GWEN
Sorry?

CAROLE
Well -

CAROLE opens her mouth. Codfish.

She snaps it shut.

CAROLE (CONT'D)

Usually - I don't know. Don't you normally - aren't you supposed to - to Talk to customers. Aren't you supposed to make them feel welcome, or give them the holiday spirit, or - something.

GWEN

Well. Um... it's not really - if you're asking literally, no ma'am, that's not in my job description. In practice, sometimes I do, anyway. But at Christmastime, it's different. Everyone's in a hurry. It gets - tiring, you know, same smile, same 30-second conversation, for hours, for these - endless lines.

CAROLE purses her lips.

CAROLE

Everyone's tired.

GWEN

...Yes ma'am.

CAROLE

Everyone is tired, not just you. And you're getting paid to be tired, so...

GWEN scans more slowly, listening carefully.

CAROLE (CONT'D)

So - get - chipper. I just - honestly, the service here is just...

GWEN looks down.

CAROLE (CONT'D)

Getting worse and worse every year.

Silence. CAROLE is expecting something.

GWEN

...Sorry.

Silence.

CAROLE

And really, dear, it's not just you. It's not even just this store - any one store - it's just - the world is getting tighter. Like a boa constrictor. Just - breaths are getting shorter, more terse. Speech is stilted. No one can talk about the weather or the holidays anymore. It's like they're saving up a very limited supply of air for something more - important. Everything is so - immediate.

Silence. GWEN finishes bagging the clothes.

CAROLE (CONT'D)

And - I just - in general, cashiers ought to have a more - a better - demeanor. Kind, happy, grateful to have a job. Genuine, you know, and happy.

GWEN stops what she is doing. Her eyes snap up. They are like a serpent's, full of fire.

GWEN

Which would you prefer?

CAROLE is taken aback. She somehow believed no one had been able to hear her. Or that no one had been listening, anyway.

CAROLE

Excuse me?

GWEN

Which would you prefer. Do you want me to be genuine? Or happy.

CAROLE

I - both, I guess.

GWEN

That wasn't an option. How will you be paying today?

CAROLE

Wait - what did you say?

GWEN

I said, will you be paying with cash, or card? Which do you prefer? And you said both.

(MORE)

GWEN (CONT'D)

And I said, that will not be a viable payment method today, because our register has been overworked. You will not be able to divide your payment today. And then you asked me to repeat what I said, and I've done so, and here we are.

CAROLE, puzzled, looks at her clothes on the counter.

CAROLE

... Right. I just - you said it so coldly, so condescendingly. Which is not how you treat a customer. So I was wondering if I - misheard. Because that was rude.

Silence.

GWEN

...So?

CAROLE

What?

GWEN

So? Do you think I care? Do you think that now that you've told me you sensed a little well-earned condescension, I need to lap up the puddles you drag your dogshit Jimmy Choos through, just because you might tell my manager on me? And you're right, you know? My livelihood hangs in the balance. My right to not starve to death relies on you deciding not to report my perceived rudeness. And I can't even begin to explain how bad of a person that makes you. Because you know that my only two choices are to worship you or to lose the only lifeboat that keeps me from drowning in debt. So that you, in turn, the person responsible for my meager existence, can then belittle me to your church friends because I need government assistance to live. You really think your life is more valuable than mine because you are clearly old and clearly rich and clearly miles and miles above me?

(MORE)

GWEN (CONT'D)

Do you think you own me and my labor because I am the serpent, and you are the choking pig, and you want to inflict some petty penultimate punishment upon me before you die at my cold, vengeful hand, gasping for air?

CAROLE

WHAT did you just say to me? I am going to speak to your manager right now! I have never been treated so tactlessly in all my life!

GWEN looks shocked, confused.

GWEN

Pardon me, ma'am, I was just saying, So? How WILL you be paying today, and then you just got this - look, like you were - like you were listening. To like, God. Or not God - I don't know. So I had to repeat the question a bit louder, and now -

CAROLE

Right, right, I've got it.

Beat.

CAROLE (CONT'D)

Is there a - do you have Christmas fragrances in the... air? I think I may be having an allergic reaction. You really shouldn't put scents like that in an enclosed space, people could be allergic. Anyway, here - ah - just there.

CAROLE slides her black card across the counter noisily. It is a power symbol. It is her shiny scale, and she will not share it, she will only share the fact that she has it.

GWEN takes the card gingerly, like she is afraid it might shatter like glass.

CAROLE checks her nails and sniffs.

GWEN swipes the card and sees an error message. She knits her brow and then presses a few buttons, swiping again. Same error.

CAROLE (CONT'D)
What the hell is taking so long?

GWEN
Sorry, ma'am, I just - do you have
another payment option?

CAROLE
No, why, is the card reader messed
up?

GWEN meets her eyes uncomfortably, but resolutely.

GWEN
No, ma'am. The card just declined.

CAROLE's face turns white. And then green. And then purple.

CAROLE
I - but - I just checked! - my
husband said -

GWEN
Ma'am, do you have another payment
method?

CAROLE
I don't - NEED one! It's - it's a
black card! THE black card. I don't
- it's like - I am well-off -

GWEN
- You can just say rich -

CAROLE
- I am RICH, dammit! You're - you
can't tell me - you can't...

GWEN's eyes narrow and she leans over the counter.

GWEN
Take a look behind you, Carole.
Turn around.

CAROLE
I don't want to - you can't make -

GWEN snaps.

GWEN
Do as I say!

Frozen with fear, CAROLE turns slowly around. She stares at a
long, long line of people. It is endless.

It supersedes the store - where has the store gone, anyway? It is like the fields of Asphodel. Everyone in the line looks angry - no - sad. Apathetic. They tap their feet and shift their weight and adjust their merchandise.

Then all at once, they freeze and stare at CAROLE. She jumps, startled.

Panicked now, she backs into the counter. As she does, GWEN laughs jarringly, menacingly. CAROLE jumps again.

CAROLE

What are you -

GWEN

Do you see them all? Staring at you? The jury. The crawling mass of bodies who will condemn you, who will drag your lifeless corpse to hell. They see your money. And it doesn't matter. Well - that's not quite true. Actually, it matters a lot, because they see your money, and they see that it is only for you. Well - that's not quite true. They see that it's for you, to hurt other people. To kill them. Because you don't think they're people. You got the money by crushing the skulls of people like me - people like them. And now, they laugh. They mock you, because it wasn't enough. The money was yours to swim in. Now, it's yours to drown in.

GWEN laughs.

GWEN (CONT'D)

Well - that's not exactly true.

CAROLE stares at her, helplessly afraid.

GWEN (CONT'D)

It was never yours in the first place.

CAROLE begins to cry, utterly terrified.

CAROLE

Please, please let me leave this place!

GWEN cocks her head, confused. CAROLE is not the type of person to say "please". She is shattered, like a mirror.

CAROLE (CONT'D)
Please. I don't want to be here
anymore.

GWEN
You can leave whenever you'd like,
ma'am.

CAROLE
What?

GWEN
You can - I mean - would you like
us to hold this for you?

CAROLE
I - what on earth? What on earth is
- why can't I -

CAROLE takes a breath to calm herself, deeply afraid that she has lost her mind and even more afraid that someone from her small group might find out and tell all their friends.

CAROLE (CONT'D)
One more time - what did you say?

GWEN
I just said, I'm really sorry, but
if you'll look behind you, it's a
really long line.

GWEN gestures to the line behind CAROLE. CAROLE is too afraid to look at them again.

GWEN (CONT'D)
... And we're really short-staffed.
So I'm happy to hold these for you,
but if you aren't able to pay right
now, I'll need to ask you to please
come back in at a later time.

CAROLE sucks air in. It's never enough.

CAROLE
Right. Yes. So sorry.

CAROLE grabs her purse to leave the store, in a trance. She starts to exit.

GWEN
Ma'am?

CAROLE turns immediately, fear-stricken.

CAROLE
What? What? What is it now, God,
what is it now?

GWEN pauses, concerned.

GWEN
Um... happy holidays.

CAROLE scoffs. She tries to regain some semblance of her superiority.

CAROLE
It's supposed to be Merry
Christmas.

CAROLE stalks away. GWEN sighs and prepares for her next customer.

END.