

## Second Place Nonfiction ~ Age 14-17

### “Summer Job”

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“Do you work here?”

It’s 4:13 p.m. and the familiar question makes me both suppress a sardonic smile and an exasperated sigh. I pause in the middle of folding a t-shirt and look up.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Do you have this in adult sizes in pink?” The woman vaguely displays a navy blue youth shirt, probably—judging by the decal of a shark and the sticker that enthusiastically proclaims I GLOW IN THE DARK—meant for a boy. She’s dressed in a faded one-piece bathing suit covered by a sheer sarong that only serves to accentuate the uneven fullness of her belly, and her sand-covered legs end in flat sequined flip-flops. A Ziploc bag encasing a few crumpled dollars, a credit card, and a cell phone dangles from one hand, and the pair of oversized tortoiseshell sunglasses perched on top of her windblown perm do nothing to conceal the half inch of roots that reveal bottled blond is not, in fact, her natural color. She smells like sweat and French fries.

“No we don’t, I’m sorry,” I say with an apologetic smile.

“Oh.” She frowns. “Well do you have any women’s shirts?”

“Yes, there are a dozen styles in two dozen colors on the wall of shelves that was right in front of your face when you walked in the store,” I inform her. Ok, I don’t tell her exactly that, but I do head her in the right direction as if pointing out the obvious to helpless tourists is my purpose in life.

Before you get the wrong idea, let me explain my situation. I work in a small store in a bustling, thriving tourist town perched on the edge of the Atlantic. Five days a week I walk four blocks from my house for my six hour shift folding shirts, working the register, unpacking boxes of beachside souvenirs, and generally picking up after tourists who don’t care how big of a mess they make. And I love my job.

The thirteen girls and one guy I work with are my best friends during the summer; we all live at the beach only during those few short months of reprieve from school. While our friends back home in other states spend their summers desperately trying to get a tan in their front yards, working at the mall, or mowing lawns, we spend our days lazing on the beach, eyeing cute lifeguards, and raising our very decidedly non-tourist eyebrows at the “shoobies,” who pass through our store.

“Do you have any women’s shirts with a lower neckline?” It’s French Fry Lady again. “These all seem like they would be high on my neck.”

“No, ma’am,” I say politely even though my patience for her is quickly waning. “Those are all our women’s shirts.”

It’s 5:45 p.m. and the phone rings.

“Hello, this is the Rainbow Fish, how may I help you?”

“Hi, could I have a pound of shrimp for takeout? Or are you only dine-in?”

“Actually, sir, we don’t have seafood, I’m sorry.”

“So you don’t do takeout?”

I speak louder in order for the man to hear me over the sudden clamor of a family with three small children who just bounded into the store.

“No, I mean we’re located at the beach, we’re not the restaurant in the next town with the same name,” I try to explain, thinking this man simply called the wrong business.

“I know. My wife gave me your phone number. You sell seafood, right?”

“No, sir, we’re just a retail store, we sell clothes and shoes and giftware, not food.”

“Oh, you don’t have seafood?”

“No.”

“Oh. Ok. Bye.”

I slide out from behind the counter with a murmured “Excuse me” to customers inspecting the racks jammed with shell jewelry, beaded jewelry, half-price jewelry, jewelry that changes color in the sun, and begin another walk around the store.

I walk down the aisle to the right, where kids’ t-shirts and sweatshirts are alternately folded on shelves in tall cubbies and hung on racks between; into the back corner of toys, circle past the Thomas the Tank Engine train set and reach down to pick up a wooden Percy, move a sippy cup with the name Sophia stamped on it from the Benjamin rack to its rightful place. Wind my way through hutches and cabinets displaying a wild assortment of giftware ranging from napkins printed with sarcastic blurbs and pictures to blue crab serving bowls and spoons to strings of dried starfish (which smell horrendous when they are first taken out of the boxes they were shipped in). Next comes a choice: wander through the middle aisle (giftware and cards) or up through the left (gift bags, refrigerator magnets, and the dressing rooms). My decision is usually influenced by how crowded each aisle is, though I more often choose the middle. I pass through the accessories section (soda cozies, hair clips, purses), pick up a luggage tag shaped like an airplane that has fallen to the floor; next is the front corner of the store, filled with a certain brand of products advertising the joys of living and men’s souvenir shirts; all beg refolding, and with a practiced ease developed over two summers I flip in the sleeves, turn in the sides, and fold up the bottom so each shirt lies in a smooth rectangle, then pile each style of shirt in crisp stacks organized in size order. Crossing the front of the store I straighten sweatshirts on wooden racks and make a pass through the shoe section, reuniting plastic hangers with the flip flops they belong to and snagging a pink-and-green patterned pair from a line of blue-and-yellow striped. My examination of the store finishes as I pass through the selection of an expensive brand of women’s clothing, a staple of the store; a quick walk through, a few shirts folded and slipped back on hangers, and I’m ready to start another round.

It’s 7:24 p.m. and I’m on the register. The routine is always the same: “Hi, how are you,” punch the numbers into the register, fold the clothes, yank a bag from the hook, count out the change or slide the credit card, “Would you like your receipt in the bag,” “Have a good night!” The line is especially long tonight and Lizzy is behind the register with me, bagging the customers’ purchases after I type the prices into the register. The last customer in line is a woman wearing a pink sequined cap and a friendly smile. As my coworker shakes open a plastic bag and slides her purchases into it, I glance at the back of the credit card she hands me and notice it is not signed.

“Do you have your ID with you?” I ask.

“Of course,” she says cheerfully and wriggles her driver’s license out of its plastic pocket in her wallet. “I look a little bit different now because I lost all my hair to chemo,” she explains with an ironic laugh, and I notice that the picture depicts a woman with a full head of thick gray

curls.

“Oh no!” I say, politely concerned but surprised at this information.

“A year ago my doctor told me I had three months to live; in October I threw a party instead of a funeral and everybody dressed in black. Now I’m here with my family for two weeks to celebrate!”

“Aww!” Lizzy and I exclaim happily, charmed by this little lady and her story.

“Congratulations and have a great night!” we chorus as she picks up her bags.

“You too, girls!” she calls over her shoulder.

It is customers like her that are the highlight of my job.

By 8:55 the store is so busy I can barely move; I move at a snail’s pace, sliding between bodies and squeezing between shelves until I find an empty corner where I can stand and observe a corner of the store.

At 10:15 I notice an older man and several children and teenagers approaching the counter and go behind the register to help Katelyn bag. The man in the lead directs the others to put their items on the counter, and Katelyn begins to furiously punch the prices into the register.

“Could we have several bags?” the man asks. He is wearing a t-shirt that reads WORLD’S BEST GRANDPA and shows us how he wants his purchases divided. As he and his family leave, we smile tiredly at the exclamations of gratitude from the grandchildren to whom he handed the bags. The store technically closes at 10:00 p.m. but we never close on time because there are always a few night owls still shopping; however it’s nice to have a closing time to look forward to, as my eyes start to find the clock more often after 9:00, and I know that 9:30 a.m. will come early enough the next morning.

\*Names have been changed