

"If Only"

By Paul Monahan

Having worked at a 7-Eleven store for two years, I thought I had become successful at what our manager calls "customer relations." I firmly believed that a friendly smile and an automatic "sir," "ma'am," and "thank you" would see me through any situation that might arise, from soothing impatient or unpleasant people to apologizing for giving out the wrong change. But the other night an old woman shattered my belief that a glib response could smooth over the rough spots of dealing with other human beings.

The moment she entered, the woman presented a sharp contrast to our shiny store with its bright lighting and neatly arranged shelves. Walking as if each step were painful, she slowly pushed open the glass door and hobbled down the nearest aisle. She coughed dryly, wheezing with each breath. On a forty-degree night, she was wearing only a faded print dress, a thin, light-beige sweater too small to button, and black vinyl slippers with the backs cut out to expose calloused heels. There were no stockings or socks on her splotchy, blue-veined legs.

After strolling around the store for several minutes, the old woman stopped in front of the rows of canned vegetables. She picked up some corn niblets and stared with a strange intensity at the label. At that point, I decided to be a good, courteous employee and asked her if she needed help. As I stood close to her, my smile became harder to maintain; her red-rimmed eyes were partially closed by yellowish crusts; her hands were covered with layer upon layer of grime, and a stale smell of sweat rose in a thick vaporous cloud from her clothes.

"I need some food" she muttered in reply to my bright "Can I help you?"

"Are you looking for corn, ma'am?"

"I need some food," she repeated. "Any kind."

"Well, the corn is ninety-five cents," I said in my most helpful voice. "Or if you like, we have a special on bologna today."

"I can't pay," she said.

For a second, I was tempted to say, "Take the corn." But the employee rules flooded into my mind: remain polite, but do not let customers get the best of you. Let them know that you are in control. For a moment, I even entertained the idea that this was some sort of test, and that this woman was somebody from the head office, testing my loyalty. I responded dutifully, "I'm sorry, ma'am, but I can't give anything away for free."

The old woman's face collapsed a bit more, if that were possible, and her hands trembled as she put the can back on the shelf. She shuffled past me toward the door, her torn and dirty clothing barely covering her bent back.

Moments after she left, I rushed out the door with the can of corn, but she was nowhere in sight. For the rest of my shift, the image of the woman haunted me. I had been young, healthy, and smug. She had been old, sick, and desperate. Wishing with all my heart that I had acted like a human being rather than a robot, I was saddened to realize how fragile a hold we have on our better instincts.

Questions:

Narratives have specific elements:

- a. Introduction/Exposition: This portion introduces the setting (time/place) and characters
 - b. Rising action: This part of the story moves along the plot (e.g. events, conflicts arising)
 - c. Climax: This is the high point of the story or even the conflict (internal or external), where there is a definite and decisive turning point to the story.
 - d. Falling action: Events that lead to the end
 - e. Resolution/denouement: The ending can do a number of things, such as resolve the conflict (in a good or bad way), clear up unanswered questions, hint at the future, or state a theme.
1. Using examples from the story, list the specific narrative elements:
 - a. Introduction:

 - b. Rising action:

 - c. Climax:

 - d. Falling action:

 - e. Resolution:
 2. Character development makes a story come alive. Describe the old woman, by using specific examples from the story.
 3. Is this story told from first-person or third-person point of view? How can you tell?
 4. The narrative point (main idea/theme) of this essay is expressed twice in this story. List the actual sentences used to express the overall idea of this story.
 - a.
 - b.
 5. You can organize a narrative by using these elements: chronological order, flashback, and flash forward.
 - a. Which of the three techniques were used in the intro? Support your answer.

 - b. Which of the three techniques were used in the rest of the story? How can you tell?