

## Always Low Prices

by Kathleen Nishimoto '09

This is the Wal-Mart cheer: Give me a W! Give me an A! Give me an L! Give me a Squiggly! Give me an M! Give me an A! Give me an R! Give me a T! What's that spell? Wal-Mart! Whose Wal-Mart is it? My Wal-Mart! Who's number one? The Customer! Always!

Kristy, our Orientation Coordinator, is almost panting after all that. We do the cheer every morning, and it's not optional, you'll all meet right here beside the time clock. But, oh, is the cheer at eight o'clock or seven? Sorry, she can't remember off the top of her head. She'll check for us though. Really meaning the other members of management might know when the cheer is, but not her, definitely not her. She's young you know, she has black hair and she's thin and she can't know when the cheer is, not yet, not with tight corduroys and high heels. She stares out at us with this silent challenge but she has a lazy eye so we submit with awkward ruffling of our orientation booklets and W-4 forms.

During break I wait in line while my friend Claire buys cigarettes. You can only buy cigarettes in aisle 17. It is absolutely not permitted in aisles 1-16 and the same goes for 18-24. If a customer becomes angry when you inform them of this policy, calmly say, "I'm sorry, but I could lose my job if I sell you cigarettes in this aisle." It's basically a problem-free situation, until suddenly I'm sent to aisle 17.

Marlboros please? So I turn around and I swear I knew exactly where they were just a minute ago but out of the corner of my eye I see thirty-one customers lining up just for cigarettes, six with screaming babies, twelve with chock-full carts and even one lady tapping her foot while drumming her fingers and no one even *does* that except in the movies. I close my eyes, take a deep breath, close my opened mouth, open my eyes, and see Virginia Slims reds lights box carton Camel longs menthol cloves filters and for the life of me I just cannot remember what he wanted in the first place and if I'm not mistaken that's my bottom jaw a few inches lower than it was a second ago. I turn around but he's smiling beneath his white mustache, points with a gnarled finger where they are, says he's glad I don't smoke and I shouldn't start.

I won't start; it's worth not it, since the surgeon general reminds us all that smoking causes lung cancer, heart disease, emphysema, infertility, pregnancy complications, asthma, respiratory infections, cough, addiction. A lot of my friends smoke cigarettes and pot, though, like the girl I sat with in the smoking break room. I peed for her preliminary employee drug test because pot stays in your system for at least thirty days. She hid my pee in a medicine bottle in her bra because they don't let you bring bags inside and this way it was at the right body temperature. She smoked before her test just so she could pass a drug test and be high at the same time. I work as a cashier and she works with the remodel crew, so I never even see her. Cashiers know cashiers and not really anyone else.

Peter's a cashier and after talking to him it hits me that the longer you stay working here the harder it is to get out. Have I heard of Franklin Pierce Community College? There's a two-year nursing program there, and he has really been looking into it lately, because you know the medical field really needs people with that two-year degree right now. He'd be making a hell of a lot more money than he does here, plus he knows he would love it. He loves working with people, he loves helping people, and it's the perfect thing for him. He's going to do it, you know, he's not just going to stay here forever. He's not going to work at Wal-Mart all his life; that was never his plan. Four days later we pass each other in the pillow aisle and he repeats himself word for word, plan for plan, dream for dream, and I wonder if he remembers that he already told me all this.

I wonder if he tells everyone. I wonder if I would tell everyone, then I remember that I do. In the small talk at the registers I try to manipulate the conversation towards college or the fall so that they can ask me if I'm going to school and where so I can say Brown University, I'm going to Brown University and in parentheses I say I'm getting out, I'm leaving and this job is temporary and I am not working here for the rest of my goddamn life. Sometimes I do this same thing to my fellow employees, my "teammates," and instead of just nodding and oh-really-ing and uh-huh-ing to their stories I get them to ask am I going to school? But then I pause because suddenly I'm embarrassed for forcing the conversation towards an opportunity for education I have that some of them never had or will have, not by any fault of their own but because they were born to those parents and I was born to these and our lives just lead in different directions. Suddenly I don't want to say Brown University, not to them, and I just say yes I am going to college and if they ask where I say in Rhode Island and if they ask where I say Providence and if they say no, which college I say Brown University quickly and ashamedly and then I am quite surprised to see the blank looks on their faces and hear "oh that's nice" because they have never heard of Brown University.

One girl has heard of Brown University. She's a junior in high school even though I'd thought she was twenty years old at least and she knows about all the horror of college searches. She has a boyfriend named Roger and they have been dating for two-and-a-half-years - yes, she knows it's a long time, and she's doing that thing when you try to hold back a smile because you're proud of something but you don't want to seem all stuck-up about it. The next Tuesday though, she announces she's pissed. Her fucking boyfriend cheated on her. He fucking cheated on her and they've been going out for two-and-a-half-years. She found the text message on his phone, it was to one of *her* girlfriends, it said all this shit and now she knows they've been hooking up behind her back, well she's not going to take that, not from him. She lives with him, so she hasn't been talking to him so that he knows she's pissed. She asked her mom this morning to move back

home and her mom's still thinking about it, but she thinks she'll just stay with her boyfriend anyway. He apologized, you know, he said he loved her and was sorry, and she thinks he is, just as long as he knows she's pissed then it'll probably be okay if she stays.

Anyways, she just came from working back in electronics and it was great. Cashiering up here in the front, that's fucking slow but back there, she thought she was there for ten minutes and she looked at the clock and it was a whole hour later! Coincidentally after my break the customer service manager sends me back to electronics. At first I admit my anticipation level is high but after about ten minutes that feel like exactly fifteen I wonder how the hell working one place in the store is better than anywhere else.

To fight boredom I obsess over my items per hour. I press ten action code and it pops up on the screen, at first only three hundred fourteen point two but after only a week I have already broken four hundred and would you believe it, sixteen days into working and my items per hour is five hundred twelve point eight. That rounds up to five hundred thirteen in anyone's book and no one can say I am a sub par cashier now. Besides, your items per hour is always lower when you're on an express lane and for some reason I'm constantly on one. Plus little things like the register not working or a customer searching for money or waiting for smaller bills from the customer service manager decreases your items per hour so that it might end up being only four hundred and eighty-six point one when really in all honesty it could have been well over five hundred.

Then I'm walking towards the front doors on my break congratulating myself on such a high items per hour with the printed-out slip hot in my pocket when the humid outside air hits my face and suddenly what the hell am I thinking? My whole life is about to become an items per hour nightmare, in which my items per hour determines my every mood and the success of each day until I introduce myself as I'm Kathleen and my highest items per hour was seven hundred and one on July 18<sup>th</sup>, 2005. Who cares about items per hour except for the four-star cashiers who wear maroon vests instead of the usual blue to denote their prestige? Who cares if I'm improving and breaking five hundred?

Not me. There are other things to care about. Like my math teacher from sophomore year who checks out in my line and asks for twenty over on her check. I've just learned how to do this so I'm feeling cocky as I type in the amount and wait for the cash drawer to pop open. Ten dollars change, the screen is telling me, ten dollars change, ten dollars change. How did this happen? I added wrong for this customer, not just any customer but someone I know, not just an acquaintance but a teacher, and why, why, why does she have to have taught me math? Flustered, I make a joke and push ten dollars change into her hand. I nervously slam the cash drawer shut with a little too much gusto so that the Barbie a lady four customers ago didn't end up buying teeters off the counter and as I compulsively grab it to make the save I cut my pinkie on the corner of the register and of course now it's bleeding.

The next customer, distracted by the light-up Minnie Mouse pens on display, doesn't notice, and I authoritatively announce that I will return shortly and walk over to the customer service manager to ask for a band-aid. Only sixteen steps later I remember the Accident-Free Policy. During orientation, the manager explained to us in great detail that if there are no reported accidents over a certain amount of time, everyone who works at Wal-Mart benefits. Salaried members of management receive a pay raise, and hourly employees benefit in a vague, unspecified way. The manager had told us that if we had an accident of course we should report it to someone. Why, just the other day there was a man who cut his foot badly. He was bleeding profusely and needed stitches. Management practically had to beg him to go to the hospital because he was so afraid of ruining the accident-free streak that the store was having. The manager assured us that nobody would get mad at us if we reported an accident, nobody would give us the cold shoulder or dirty looks, no one would ostracize us or not understand why we reported the accident or make Wal-Mart a dangerous place for us to work, while I hadn't thought of any of those possibilities before she mentioned them.

Jennie's a cashier too, who works 10-7 every day except Sunday. She's probably fifty, not quite five feet. Her skin is knotted in purple and red lumps on her knuckles and wrists. Her daughter has a boyfriend, he's okay, nice enough, but this daughter, she is really something else. First she moves out with her boyfriend, lives with him, now she wants to move back in, but doesn't want to help around the house, won't even think of getting a job, and she just takes up fucking space when there are so many people in the house right now anyways - Jennie's son and niece and nephew and sister - and it's hard enough to fit them all in and make the meals. And who fucking makes the meals anyways? Who? Not her husband, no, she works hard all day in this fucking store, full-time job, working all day, comes home at seven and it's either everyone staring at her wanting to know what's for dinner, when's dinner, or else everyone has eaten and she eats fucking cereal, yes, fucking cereal, or leftovers by herself. And that's after working all day! All day since ten a.m.

It gets better though. Jennie's daughter came to her last night and asked for an application to work at Wal-Mart, and she is proud, yes, she said it, *proud* of her daughter now, who will get off her lazy ass and find a fucking job here and see how it is to work hard all day. Jennie's smiling though and her cheeks are a little flushed. I ask her what's the good news, is there more, she says nonchalantly oh her husband is meeting her for her lunch break, that's all, they're going out to eat, you know one hour for a break is perfect for a restaurant, for sitting down and eating together, and it was even his idea! Then ten minutes and three unanswered phone calls have passed and where the fuck is her husband? She only has an hour you know, that is not very long for a lunch break, you can't just waste it like this, and he is supposed to come at 11:15, they talked about it last night and this morning and he's late now, he's late, so she'll just have to go wait outside on the sidewalk but he better be fucking coming. Before she leaves she grins momentarily and pushes three candy bars into my hand, Hershey's, Crunch bar, Butterfinger, says eat those, they're so good, eat those.

I save them in my pocket until break and by then they're all soft. On breaks I go outside and sit on the benches or the sidewalk if the benches are broken, and text my friends. I'm such a badass for carrying my phone in my pocket because that is strictly not allowed but I can't take the monotony and when my phone vibrates it's a sharp reminder that there is life outside Wal-Mart, that my friends who are texting or calling me live out of these walls. It's easier than you'd imagine to forget that the world extends beyond Always Low Prices. That's why I just have to go outside on all my breaks, to feel

the humid air and the sweat on my shirt just because I can. I face the parking lot and refuse to turn and look at the building, laughing under my breath because Wal-Mart hasn't trapped me yet, and I can still go and sit on the damn sidewalk and stare at the parking lot if I want to.

I watch the cars move like a screensaver, coming and going, leaving a space that just gets filled in again. I imagine sitting in this same spot, waiting for my husband to come get me for lunch and bring me back in an hour, then take me out again in another week and bring me back again in another hour, over thousands and thousands and lifetimes and lifetimes of lunch breaks. It's really only symbolic, me sitting here outside, because obviously any one of the employees can go sit on the sidewalk, but I'm one of the only ones who does because you get trapped working there - you forget that there are other careers, other mission statements, other cheers.