

Secret Shopper

A week after we first moved in together, Darius bought me a no-reason gift. He made me hide in the bedroom so he could set it up properly, but I saw the empty box lying on our bed. A hot-air popcorn popper—neither romantic nor useful. I made popcorn every weekend in the overly-heavy iron pot my mom gave us when I moved out. Why would he spend money on a contraption that had only one purpose?

“C’mon,” he called, and I entered the kitchen and feigned surprise and glee and immediately popped us a batch. The salt wouldn’t stick to the popcorn because the popper didn’t need oil, which was the point of popping it in the iron pot. I resented this health-minded loss of decadence.

“The perfect gift,” I told him, making my grateful face.

Fact is, I grew addicted to that popper. Tonight, I’m slack-brained from a day of organizing dysfunctional teenagers and Pennsylvanian parents into groups. Learning groups. That’s the theory, the reality is the kids want to hang out with their friends and the parents want to be home drinking beer and watching *Hill Street Blues*. Forcing them to talk to me is sometimes a waste of time, a cruel joke on the one kid who’ll get picked on when a Canadian like me is not around to hold the familial hand. That’s one of the reasons they’ve sent me here, though I’m more here to train other staff and try to let them train me. I’m a caseworker-turned-administrator extraordinaire, sent to homes where the parents are often more of a problem than the

kids. But you can't tell them that. You can't tell them anything but positive action words: "focus," "strengthen," "achieve." I hang around and make discreet throat noises. Sometimes the noises work and the parents care more about what I think than they realize. They don't want a bad report card, they don't want a police file, they don't want their kids taken away even though they quite often don't want their kids. And that's how it works—I scare them into believing they should stop scaring their kids. But today's *strengths* didn't *achieve* positive *focus*; I've had it with trying to convert delinquent parents. Really, I'm here to observe more than change, but that role depresses me more than failing to reach parents. I want to be back in Calgary, choosing a movie with Gabrielle. But even a long-distance phone call isn't going to happen, because tonight Gabrielle's line beeps busy for hours, and then there's no answer at all.

I glance in my mini fridge—a raw steak and three wilting carrots. I want to bend open the cover of a new mystery, flick on the TV. I think of that popper as I shove a flavoured bag of buttered corn into the microwave because I'm too lazy to shake a heavy pot over the stove. I swirled corn in that popper for years and years, even kept it after Darius left, right up until its cord frazzled and shorted. I should buy another popper, though I know I won't. The microwave popcorn is good enough, though not great, not even close to movie quality. And you have to stop the microwave before all the kernels are popped or they'll burn. But buying another popper would somehow feel like a betrayal. The perfect gift, and I popped it. I turn on the local news and settle down to focus on other people's problems that are not mine to solve.

Although I'm not allowed to speak of individual teens or mention specific names that come through the Teen Centre back in Calgary, if Gabrielle were available for chatting, I could complain about the Philadelphia Learning Group I'm here to train, about the extremely short kid with knife scars on his back, the parents who showed up thirty minutes late "to teach him a lesson." The staff behave as if knife marks on a twelve-year-old are routine, don't even add that case to my seminar discussion group. I could tell Gabrielle all this, because she wouldn't know these people, would never meet them, there'd be no breach of confidence. And Gabrielle would give me her day, the stationery shop she visited where the clerk wouldn't help her with the too-high Valentine cards, "Because he didn't want to insult me," she'd say, "because letting me poke a stick to shove one off the top ledge is preferable, dignity-wise, than him simply helping." An assistant who assists, what a concept.

I sink into the rented couch and dial Gabrielle's line again. Busy. Busy, busy, and then no answer. No answering machine, even. Ignoring me or her Manitoba Mennonite? Gabrielle's not cement-hard and lemon-bitter, but she prefers her girlfriends to think that she is, rather than think she needs them. She once went for an ice cream with a girl who pitied her. A long evening of a near-stranger asking her if she needed to go to the bathroom, if she wanted more to drink, if she felt comfortable in her chair. At the end of that date, Gabrielle got the impression she was supposed to thank the girl. Instead, she wheeled herself up her ramp while Charity Girl pushed her needlessly. Gabrielle unlocked her door, let the girl hold it open for her, grabbed a half-filled can of mauve paint and a camera from her studio.

She wheeled back outside, down the ramp, and flung streaks of purple all over Charity Girl's car. "Thank you," she said, taking a few polaroids, "thanks so much."

I try to imagine her day. I go through images of Gabrielle painting in the morning, then her paying job in the afternoon, and an evening lusting for her out-of-town girlfriend. Suddenly, Gabrielle's day bursts fully-formed from my head, an Athenanarrative. My best friend's story:



Before heading for work, Gabrielle has to decide whether to take her power wheelchair or the manual. She lets the type of workplace that she has to evaluate that day make the decision for her. Which chair she chooses on her own and which she chooses for work are almost always exact opposites. When she's sent to evaluate coffee shops and restaurants, it's usually Emmanuel, because there's always some waiter who tries to move her around without asking first. A sudden shift in her landscape when she's rudely hauled away from her table. *Nobody* can move the power chair. But when her job was to evaluate a car rental agency, she took her motorized chair because the "oh-yes-we-have-absolutely-exactly-what-you-need" guys had to figure out how to rent a van to someone who could drive, but who couldn't lift a chair that weighed nearly as much as a car into their vehicle. You're either mobile, or you're not, end of story. The idea of a ramp she could use to drive her chair right up and into the back of the van had never occurred to them before. But, hey, if she wanted to bring her own, that would be great.

Each of the two chairs leads people to yet another set of assumptions about her body and what they think it should be able to do. Or shouldn't. Once she used her foot to punt a nerfball to a kid in a toy store and his mother glared at her like she was stealing money from the Sunday collection plate.

Today, she's got sexism as well as the crip-factor to provoke, wonders which one will win out, which will prove to be the more pervasive prejudice. She chooses her motorized chair, because at least one guy in the shop will then assume she doesn't have use of her arms. She spent the morning working on a new canvas, and by 2:15 has the afternoon free for this job. But the report has to be in by tomorrow, so she better not have too much fun.



At five to three, Gabrielle rolls through the automatic doors toward customer service. The guy working behind the high counter doesn't see her so she has to reach up and knock on the particle board.

"Oh. Hey. Can I help you?" The guy bends forward onto the counter so his belly rests against its flat surface and his chest leans into her face. "Hi, I'm Gabe!" his nametag declares. He's smacking a wad of gum so large it garbles his words.

"Hi, Gabe!" Gabrielle imitates his tag's enthusiasm. "We share a name!" His eyelid does a sudden twitch, so she just continues. "Well, I'm here to buy your deck kit, but I need advice on the height sizing." Gabrielle points to the flyer she's brought with her, displaying a bright new back deck, complete with husband

at the new barbecue, wife and kids eagerly waiting to be fed, dog happily curled up in the newly-painted corner.

“Oh. Hey,” says Gabe. “We prefer if the guy assembling it comes in. Maybe you can come back with your husband when he gets off work?” He blows a bubble and leans down a bit more. Gabrielle is tempted to snatch his nametag and wheel off in the direction of the manager, but her job is only just starting in this place, she hasn’t even talked to the hardware guys yet, just this front man, whose magenta bubble has slid down over his nose. He sticks his tongue out, licks the pink goo back into his mouth and waits. In all fairness, Gabrielle thinks, most salesclerks never assume she’d even have a husband.

“I’m not married,” Gabrielle says into the next expanding bubble. “And your flyer says anyone can do the construction, ‘no professional experience necessary’.” She quotes from the flyer, folds her hands over her lap, and waits.

Gabe blows another bubble, letting gum fill the space where his words should be. Hey, he’s in charge of customer service and he *knows* you can’t tell crippled people they’re not as capable as normal people. But no way this chick can build a back deck by herself, must be a brother or uncle helping her. Gabrielle can see Gabe’s thoughts inside a cartoon bubble hovering beside his forehead. He’s not going to push it, she might be some sort of women’s libber. How’s she going to hammer a nail and not end up propelling her wheelchair backwards at the same time? He looks at her for real now, taking in her nose ring and burgundy-tinged hair. Same age as him, he’d guess, cute in a mousy way, except what’s with those billowy neon yellow pants, don’t cripples cover their knees with grey blankets? He pulls

his hands behind the counter. He wants to touch those slacks, they look like they're made of parachute material. He gets the feeling this woman could float out of the chair, if he blew a big enough bubble. Maybe he should offer to help her with the deck construction, except that's against company policy. Only the hardware guys work assembly, and then the store charges customers by the hour. No sitting around drinking a beer, yacking about what kind of accident was she in anyway, and how come she wears so much yellow?

Gabe's sister used to tell him that yellow was a colour you should never risk. "Very few people can pull it off," she'd say to him, arranging her own layers of muted blue skirt and metallic green blouse. "A real woman has to be confident, work on having perfect skin, and figure out what in her closet might go well with banana." Gabe looks down at this woman's skin, but he can't tell what qualities his sister would look for—perfect shade or perfect smoothness? Gabrielle just sits there, waiting for him to say something, without twitching her fingers, without tapping a toe. Oops, even with her sitting in a wheelchair right in front of his eyeballs, Gabe keeps forgetting that she can't tap her toes, or hop up and poke his bubble with her fingernail, though she looks like she wants to. He lets his bubble sag and spits the gum into the garbage. Shouldn't be chewing at work, anyway. He knows what he has to say to this customer, knows the exact words to offer her. But as soon as he says them, she'll wheel away, and then he'll never get to see her yard, nor what colour a woman who wears tropical pants will paint her deck.

"Hey, you wanna build in February, I'm not the one to stop you," he says, his first words in minutes, and points her toward

the Handyman aisle. "The guys down there will help you choose a deck kit to fit your yard." Gabe watches Gabrielle back up and turn with the flick of her index finger, only now noticing that her chair is powered. Perhaps she can't even lift her arms? Shit, how's she going to nail two pieces of wood together, let alone a deck that will hold the weight of that chair? But then she waves at him behind her head, and he realizes she knows he's still staring. Maybe she's got extra good senses, because of her handicap? Or is that just blind people? Gabrielle turns into aisle seven, her hand still waving behind her, and Gabe gets back to work. Next guy in line wants to know if they sell measuring tapes! Geez, what a moron.



Gabrielle comes to the end of aisle seven, waits for the two guys at the back to stop chattering and ask to help her. There's no counter here, they can see her perfectly. She can smell freshly-cut cedar and pine and maple as well as paint and metal shavings and plastic and oil lubricants. Maybe she should pick up something for Emmanuel's squeaking wheel? The one guy's bragging about how he treated his kids to a skiing weekend, dropped \$600 bucks just on ski-lifts and lunch. The other guy, sprouting a pimply forehead and scraggly chin, nods, sure, sure, kids cost a fortune. Two nametags: "Hi, I'm Jim Cardell!" and "Hi, I'm Tod!" Older guy must be a sub-manager or something. Gabrielle turns to him.

"Excuse me," she says, and the older man stops mid-sentence. "I'd like help choosing and sizing a deck for my back

entrance.”

“Sure thing. When do you want it ready by?” Jim Cardell squats down so their faces are level.

“Not sure, your guy at the front desk seems to think February’s a bad month for building.” Gabrielle inches her chair back a bit. “Think I should be able to get it done by May? The brochure says it’s easy.”

“Are you kidding?” Jim Cardell says. “I can have that done in no time.” He shoots Tod a look, which ricochets right back at Gabrielle. “Don’t know why Gabe said February’s bad. With a good Chinook I’ll have that baby built for you in two weekends.” He gets up. He’s speaking to Tod, but points at Gabrielle just in case there’s any confusion. “You get the specifics of her yard, including back steps, Tod, and I’ll get the service book.” Gabrielle has to raise her voice to catch him before he walks away.

“Excuse me,” she says, and raises one finger. I picture her nails manicured a Philly-style studded blue. “I understand some customers hire you to construct the job, but your brochure says anyone can build this deck themselves, ‘no professional experience necessary.’” She holds out the flyer. The mother in the photo is beginning to look like maybe she should just go in and make a sandwich and forget about her husband’s raw hamburgers that take him an entire Sunday afternoon just to burn on the outside and serve stubbornly pink on the inside.

Jim Cardell does an about-face. “Miss, this is men’s work. Even a *normal* woman couldn’t build this deck by herself. No offence.” And there it is: the crip-sexist moment she’s been waiting for. Time to wrap this up and head for the C-Train so she

can get her notes down safely before she forgets Jim Cardell's sandpaper voice. This evaluation will write itself.

"You're the manager?" Gabrielle asks. She can't pull out her notebook in front of them, has to remember his name by the time she gets out of the outlet, and hides among masses of seated commuters.

"Assistant Manager," Jim Cardell announces with forced heartiness, then points to Tod. "But he'll tell you the same thing, and so will my boss—no way can you hammer a deck together all by yourself." He takes a breath, like he's been through a difficult mission. "Well, it's noble of you to try, noble that you want to do things on your own, but some jobs are just too tough, and that's why *we're* here to help." His legs spread to secure his solid torso. "This just isn't a job for someone with special needs." Gabrielle fiddles with her steering mechanism to distract herself from whipping out a caustic retort. "You need muscles, lots of them," he says, and flexes his own as if she may not, quite, understand his word choice. "You need to walk back and forth just to hammer different ends." He stops, checking to see how she's taking the news that she has a disability.

"You know," Gabrielle says slowly, "my entire backyard is cement. So I guess I could wheel back and forth, rather than try walking." She catches Tod's lips twitch once, then settle back into a smooth line.

"Look, miss," Jim Cardell says, "you don't understand." Gabrielle waits for his impeding explanation. But Jim Cardell shrugs his shoulders. He's finished sugar-coating this handicap-handyman business. "This is a *big* job. You want a *beautiful* deck, let us build it for you. Otherwise, you buy the material, you get

it delivered to your front yard, and it sits there.” Jim Cardell means to let out a cynical chuckle, but it comes out a burp instead. “Sits there annoying your neighbours because you can’t even lift the wood into the backyard.” Then Jim Cardell shakes his head sadly, agonizing for the hard-done-by neighbours.

Gabrielle moves her chair in a bit, grazing Jim Cardell’s slacks at the cuffs, and stares up at both of them. “*Look*,” she says, carefully imitating Jim Cardell’s intonation. “Is that your selling point? Is that how you manage it, get customers to sign up for the labour as well as the material because you convince them they’re feeble?” Gabrielle loves using the word “feeble” with such reckless abandon. The two guys each take a step back. Jim Cardell shrugs again, but this time he says nothing.

When Gabrielle powered into this hardware store, she felt like a secret agent, like a rogue: paint smells permeated the building and the aisles were wide enough to navigate her motorized wheelchair without worrying about tight corners. All the floors were cement and incredibly even—people would be surprised how warped some store floors can be. But she’s only eleven minutes into the job and she already knows how her report will turn out. May as well get home and start writing. “Salesclerks intimidate customers into buying more service.” Shit, what if that’s exactly what the company *wants* to hear? Gabrielle actually thinks her job is important: sneaking up on service people, asking for assistance when they know the boss isn’t around. But she’s heard rumours that she’s just an extremely underpaid market researcher. What if the company *wants* to hear about their employees tricking customers for an extra buck? She loves her job but today her stomach sours at

the thought of opening herself up to more offensive slights and slurs. Bone-headed twerps like Jim Cardell insult her to her face and aren't even smart enough to act embarrassed. They just blink a few times before pawning her off to the next clerk. Her lips ache from smiling, and she's suddenly pissed off at her own act of folded hands as if she's some sort of holy lady. She unclenches her body.

The two men huddle together without her. Gabrielle wheels away, down the light-bulb aisle, past the hammers and screwdrivers and wrenches. She snags a child's balloon with her handlebar, grimacing with satisfaction at its wet *pop*.

Tod finds her grasping handfuls of nails, $\frac{3}{4}$ " in her left hand, $\frac{1}{2}$ " in her right. He speaks for the first time: "You follow the instructions, you'll have no trouble with this kit," he tells Gabrielle, walking back with her toward the hobby section. "But the wood planks are super heavy, and someone has to hold the other end while you hammer, no matter what. It ain't just you, even I couldn't assemble this kit single-handed. Cardell couldn't, either." He looks around to see if his boss will come charging back into the sales pitch, but way down the aisle Jim Cardell is barking orders into his walkie-talkie.

Gabrielle's tired of today's assignment. Of *course* these clerks are going to be condescending and manipulative, it's her job to catch them at just that. They sell the extra features, she plays her part of handy-handi woman. They don't know she's a spy, a plant, a devious mole. Bottom line is, this is Man's World, even when the male customers wandering the store will also be tricked and manipulated into buying manual labour as well as pre-assembled parts. Focus on the job, she tells herself.

“So,” she snaps at Tod, “the brochure *should* say, ‘beware: at least two semi-professional people required for assembly?’” She waves the pamphlet in the air in front of his crotch. “Just tell me this: if I pay you guys to put it together for me, do I have to pay for just one of you or for both?”

Tod looks back down the aisle at his absentee boss, who busies himself lining up two-by-fours so that the red painted ends are spectacularly even. “Actually,” Tod confesses, pointing his chin in the direction of where Jim Cardell slaps at the sawed wood, “a team of us come out, usually four or five—we get it done in two days, depending on the weather, and you pay by the hour, times five. But it’s *never* just one guy.” He hands back the store flyer to her, not able to preach its words or promise its photographs. Tod wears the hardware uniform: grey coveralls with the store logo printed in orange over the breast pocket. He’s also got one ear pierced, and wears his hair longer in front than in back. His hands and fingernails are clean, way cleaner than Gabrielle’s, which are always encrusted with paint flecks.

“So, there aren’t as many handymen in Calgary as your store likes to suggest?” Gabrielle is amused again. She’s had rotten service and she’s had service so patronizing she can see the snot forming in the salesclerk’s nostrils, but she’s never had service this honest before. Perhaps it’s a new trend. Forget the negative report, maybe she’ll write a fan letter about Tod. “Okay, in that case, I’ll take the construction workers as well as the kit.” She pulls out her credit card, and miraculously, Jim Cardell is back, ready to step in and close this deal.

“Here,” Jim Cardell says, handing her a piece of orange cardboard. “We fill in the model number you want. Then take this to

one of the tills and they'll bill you there. You can choose a week-end date when you get up front." Having closed the sale, he's done, does not want to even risk being the foreman in charge of building for a crazy lady in a wheelchair who will probably want to mess up their workman rhythm by "helping." Gabrielle stuffs her wallet into the pocket behind her backrest, redirects her chair to the front of the aisle, lets them believe they are free, that she's gone, the deal done, the deck already gleaming sunbeam yellow in a February Chinook.

"Uh, one more thing," she says, halting her backward motion. Just when they think it's safe to come out of the hardware aisle. Jim Cardell raises his eyes to the ceiling, he has suffered enough for his carpenter's talent. Now he knows how Jesus felt. He squats down beside her chair again.

"What else can we do for you?" He wobbles a bit, but his body remains at exactly her height.

"Oh, I almost forgot." She gives a "silly-me" laugh, to show: how could she ever forget such a thing? "What about a ramp?" she asks. "Your brochure says you offer a variety of deck kits—designed for *everyone's* needs." She stares straight into Jim Cardell's eyeballs, because really, it's about time he earned his salary, rather than leaving all these details to a subordinate who doesn't make enough to drop \$600 on one day's skiing. "Obviously, I'll need a ramp rather than stairs."

"Um ..." Tod starts, but Jim takes this one for the team.

"Noooo, that would entail much more wood than kits that supply the normal three steps. A ramp would need about twelve times as much wood, in fact." Jim Cardell's pleased with his answer.

“Oh, I’ll pay for a more expensive kit,” Gabrielle reassures them both. “I just want to buy one flexible enough to include a ramp.” She drums her fingers against the metal frame of her wheelchair in a staccato beat. “You can do that, can’t you?” she asks the air. “And, you know, absolutely make sure it will hold the weight of a motorized vehicle.” She refolds her hands; she is a holy lady. If only she could include pictures with her final report.



When Gabrielle visits Paris, the art gallery that invited her only has escalators, the curator and two men lean her backwards into the steps and hold onto her armrests as they all ascend. At night she crashes with Jana, who lives close to the gallery, and whose apartment building has an elevator wide enough for Emmanuel. Aside from her show, Gabrielle’s main tourist objective is not the Louvre but the Père Lachaise cemetery—row upon row of granite and marble marking names engraved onto their stones. Antiquated cemeteries seem to have been designed for wheelchair access. Gabrielle zips along the main paths, humming an updated tragic-lesbian version of Dr Hook’s “*Sylvia’s Mother*.” Paris streets have nearly defeated her, filled as they are with cobblestones, unwary traffic, and fresh, rained-upon poodle shit. She wears gloves all day, buys seven replacement pairs during her short stay. Gabrielle pays tribute to the graves of Molière and Colette and Oscar Wilde. “Wilde’s ornate headstone is covered with a thousand lipstick kisses,” she writes to me in a postcard, “and over it all looms a large

sphinx with its genitals knocked off!" When she returns, she tells me she left a stone on Gertrude Stein's grave. "I intended to leave my bra," she admits to me, "but I didn't think I could top Wilde's lip tributes."

Gabrielle's deep secret: bitter, twisted, pessimistic Gabrielle was once a fallen woman: in love. She fell long and hard and didn't get up again for eons. The expression, "her heart was broken," is inaccurately passive—she smashed her own heart, slamming against it so hard it burst.

Burst from the falling. From the hard concrete landing. Long ago, we were both balancing up there on the tightrope. But Gabrielle could see that they were already taking down the tent. I thought I was an acrobat, but actually I was an obsolete astronaut—living on the thinnest stream of Darius's love, holding my breath to make the minutes last. Counting seconds. At the end of the countdown, there waited Gabrielle: broken and restored, destroyed and pieced back together again. A perfect Bible story.