

# YOU NEVER KNOW WHAT'S GOING TO COME THROUGH THE DOOR

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Formatting by Katrina Joyner; cover art by Tatiana Villa.

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## YOU NEVER KNOW WHAT'S GOING TO COME THROUGH THE DOOR

The store was dead, daylight had long faded, and it was still an hour until closing. A cold rain had been falling since mid afternoon, further depressing Margaret Purcell's mood. She hadn't a sale in over three hours and all the new stock had been long put away, so all Margaret had to do was walk the floor in the Men's Department and glance at her watch every three minutes. For about a half hour, she had tried to unfold and then refold a table full of Izod knit shirts, but gave up out of sheer boredom.

From across the store came the echo of laughter, which meant the other sales associates were gathering at the register in the Women's Sportswear. Margaret gave no thought to joining them, knowing instinctively that a woman old enough to be their grandmother would not be welcome in a discussion of boyfriends. All she had to talk about was her Harry, right now asleep in front of the TV, waiting for her to get home and wake him up so he could go to bed and fall back to sleep just as soon as his head hit the pillow.

Thinking about Harry made her want a cigarette. One of the benefits of working in Men's was its very close proximity to the public restrooms; all Margaret had to do was slip away for a minute, light up in a stall and kill some time. She was just about to retrieve her hidden pack of Marlboro Lights from under the register when she heard the *whoosh* of the front doors opening. A customer, and the possibility of a sale, to save the evening from being a complete loss, she hoped. However, this small hope was dashed when she looked up and saw Mike Rose sauntering over to a table of Ralph Lauren shirts. Mike was a regular, but not a paying, customer. He was a master of the five-finger discount and not being caught. Mike's modus operandi was to secret an article of clothing, retreat to the restroom, put it on underneath his street

apparel and just walk out the door, usually leaving the price tag on the floor as a calling card.

*Not tonight, you fat ass son of bitch,* Margaret thought. *You can't steal it if you can't hide it and you can't hide it if I stand here and watch you every damn minute.* At least this was better than being bored.

Walking over to the opposite side of the Ralph Lauren table she said, "Can I help you with anything?" in her best customer friendly voice.

"Nah, just looking," was Mike's muttered reply.

"Please let me know if I can be of any assistance," Margaret replied pleasantly, then folded her arms and stood her ground. He ignored her for a few minutes then moved over to a table of jeans, she followed, receiving an angry glare for her efforts. *I have got until closing to ride your ass and I'll enjoy every minute of it.*

Then, out of the corner of her eye, she saw him. It was another customer who somehow had slipped past her unseen and was all the way across the Men's department, browsing a rack of jackets. He appeared to be a young man and her first thought pegged him as Mike's accessory, there to distract her while he helped himself to merchandise, but as she approached this new arrival, Margaret forgot all about that notion. No crony of Mike Rose would wear a coat and tie on any day of the week, much less on a Monday night.

"Can I help you find anything?" She spoke this same sentence a dozen times each day and took pride that she made it sound fresh for every new shopper.

As she spoke, he turned to meet her and Margaret did a double take, for standing there in the middle of the Men's Department of Wilk Brothers clothing store was Ricky Nelson, looking as though he had just stepped out of an old black and white TV. It was as if decades had fallen away and she was a little girl again, sitting in front of the television on Wednesday nights. Only Ricky had never worn sunglasses on his show, unlike his reincarnation here and now.

"You most certainly can help me," he said, and her nostalgic moment came to an abrupt end. Ricky had never spoken with an accent that was pure Deep South like this boy. She also noticed for the first time how deathly pale his

skin appeared to be and apprehension crawled ever so gently up her back. “I’m checking to see if you stock a coat just like this one,” he continued in that drawl with a gesture indicating the outer garment he was wearing. “Looks like I’m in the market for a new one. I’ve worn a 38 regular since the year I turned fifteen.” It was a dark blue sport coat, retro back to the early 60’s. Right below the left lapel was a large stain. To Margaret’s eyes, it looked as though it had been made by wine, but the kid seemed too young to be drinking, but in this day and age, she silently told herself, it didn’t mean anything.

She knew a half dozen ways to get that kind of spot out, but remained silent; a sale was a sale. “I never try and disappoint a customer if I can help it,” Margaret said and pointed to a rack at the end of the row. “What you want is right over here.”

The rack was a four-way filled with a mixture of stripes and solid colors and when the young man saw them, he turned toward her and said, “I meant what I said, there had better be one in there just like the one I’ve got on now.” That’s when she glimpsed them, if only for a second: two razor sharp incisors, as wicked looking as those belonging to her neighbor’s Doberman. She suddenly doubted very much if the stain had been made by wine.

“It’s very important to me,” he continued, “to replace the one I got with something exactly like it. It doesn’t matter if it’s long out of style; don’t want to hear that crap and I refuse to lower myself to rummaging through boxes at Goodwill. Soiled throw outs and frayed cuffs just won’t cut it and you can’t find anybody who can make these things from hand anymore. So, Margaret,” he said, after leaning in to get a look at her name tag, “do you think you can find anything on your racks that can satisfy me?” He gave her a slight smile and again revealed those pointed teeth.

For a moment, she considered screaming and running for the door; anything to get away from this monster, for that is what she knew he was despite a passing resemblance to a long dead teen idol. But if it was true, then it was doubtful she would make it halfway to the front before he would be on her and there would be another stain on that jacket. Then decades of customer service

took over. "I'm sure I can find you something you'll like," she said, careful not to betray any hint that he was not just another customer.

"I don't want just anything you think I might like, Margaret. I want a dark blue sport coat just like the one I'm wearing," The threat was in the words, of that she was sure.

"Of course you do." With all the effort she could muster, Margaret managed a smile. From very far away came a familiar giggle, *Why couldn't one of those little snips have worked Men's and had the good fortune to be stuck with the customer who really might just be from hell.* The rack was jammed with coats; each arm filled to capacity. At first glance, it looked as though at least six different versions of blue were in stock, quite a selection, but none a perfect match. Margaret felt sweat bead up on her scalp as she began to sift through the rack, praying to find the right color that would somehow please this creature.

"The first one of these I ever owned was made by Howlin & Stritch, they were a men's clothing manufacturer with a plant just outside of Boston," he said as he stood behind her.

"I'm sorry but we don't stock that vendor," Margaret replied, the name was unfamiliar to her.

"I'm sure you don't, seeing how they went bankrupt in 1969. I managed to snag one of the last originals from a clearance rack in a Wilk Brothers store just before Christmas that year."

"How fortunate for you," she answered.

"It cost me five dollars and ninety-nine cents, that first one I mean," he continued, "earned the money to pay for it pumping gas at an Esso station after school."

"Esso? Haven't heard that name in a very long time," she said as she finished sifting through one arm of the four-way rack without any luck. For a brief moment, all the colors ran together-blue, white, green and gray-into a hideous rainbow.

“They call it Exxon now,” the young man said. “Except for up in Canada, where it’s still called Esso, the way it should have stayed.”

“I believe there was a merger, the new name is ExxonMobil.” She didn’t dare turn around or acknowledge that he was recalling things he did not appear old enough to have experienced firsthand. She just kept looking for what he wanted, without any luck.

“Merger? Well I don’t keep up with the news very much.”

“I don’t suppose you do.” She spoke without thinking.

“Suppose I don’t do what, Margaret?” The tone of his voice remained conversational, but the hairs on the back of her neck stood up; she was on the third arm now, still no luck.

“Keep up with the news, mergers and things like that.” She was trying very hard to be very careful.

“And things like that?” he said. “Just what do you think I’m doing when I should be keeping up with things like that, Margaret?”

“I wouldn’t know.”

“But you think you know, assume you know,” he said. “By your response, you implied that you have knowledge of what I do with my time. So tell me, what is it that I do with my days and nights that keeps me so busy, Margaret?”

*I will not turn around, I will not let him see my face*, she kept telling herself. “Young people like you wouldn’t find business news very interesting, I thought.” It seemed like an innocuous enough answer.

“I don’t believe that’s what you thought at all, Margaret.” She froze; he was speaking right into her ear after moving without a sound. Hot breath scorched her lobes.

For a brief moment, she seriously considered screaming, but some inner voice spoke an old rule of retail, *if you don’t have what they want, sell them what you got*. Margaret pulled a 38 regular from the rack, it was not exactly what he wanted; the shade of blue wasn’t as dark and the lapels were narrower, but it came awfully close to matching what he was wearing.

Turning around to stand face to face with him, she held the coat up, “I think this is the closest we can come to what you want. It’s hardly a perfect match, but when you consider that your original is now probably more than 50 years old, making it impossible to find an exact equivalent, then I think you’ll agree this will be an excellent replacement for the soiled rag you’re wearing now.” Her heart was pounding.

For a very long minute, the young man stood there only inches from her, so close was he that she got a good look at the spidery black veins under his alabaster white skin. Then he took his dark glasses off, blood red eyes met hers. “I bought that original Howlin & Stritch sport coat in the fall of 1959,” he said. “Since then, it has been replaced seventeen times. Every one of those times, I went into a store, just like this one, and asked a sales lady to help me find an exact match and I always left with what I came for, but I never paid for it, not one penny, not one time. You want to know why, Margaret?”

*Customer service, customer service*, her mind repeated. *Agree with them on anything as long as you get the sale.* “Yes, please tell me,” she answered.

“They were about to scream, every damn one of the bitches, when they saw what I was.” He smiled, giving another brief glimpse of razor sharp incisors. “But the thing is: I was going to pay cash, every time; just a simple transaction and I would leave with my merchandise, but I smelt the fear on them. It oozed out of their pores the way juice does out of a broiling steak and I couldn’t help myself.” He made a gesture, indicating their surroundings. “Clothing stores never change, not down through the years, the racks are still at least four feet high and when you pull someone down to the floor in the blink of an eye, nobody notices.”

The monster that wore the young man’s face, took a step back. “I can smell the same fear on you, Margaret,” he said, “and the scent is thick.”

*Customer Service, Customer Service.* She looked right into his eyes filled with hell’s fire and said, “This coat was originally \$175.00, but it’s now been green lined to \$125.00. Will that be cash or do you want to put it on your Wilk Brothers card?”

Those crimson eyes regarded her for a moment, and then he reached into his pocket and pulled out a wad of bills. "Like I said, I always pay cash."

"That'll be fine, I will ring it up for you," she said, and with coat in hand, headed for the register, not wanting to look at those eyes any more than necessary. That was when she noticed Mike Rose heading down the hallway to the public restrooms, she had completely forgotten about him and frankly no longer cared what he might be hiding under his overcoat. With shaking hands, she punched in the transaction number and prepared to wand the bar code on the tag, hoping that was all it would take to get rid of this particular customer.

"I'll be right back in a minute." Margaret jumped; without a sound, the young man had followed her. He then proceeded down the same hallway Mike had walked seconds before.

*I could run for it, right now, she thought. I could be out the front door and across the parking lot to the car in two minutes. Get the hell out of her and don't look back, let those little snips in ladies sportswear handle that thing.*

But she did nothing of the kind, except to ring up the coat for a \$125.00 plus tax cash sale. Then she waited, and waited. Minutes ticked by and Margaret watched the hallway that led back to an antiseptic pair of customer restrooms, but still no one returned. Finally, she picked up the phone to call the floor manager's number; he'd be found where he usually spent every evening: back in his office on the other side of the store, talking on an outside line to his girlfriend. She had punched the first two digits of his pager number, when the creak of the restroom door was heard from down the hall, followed by the sound of footsteps on parquet. Her customer had returned.

Only when he was almost back to the register did Margaret notice he was carrying something in his left hand, a couple of Ralph Lauren tee shirts. "Thought you'd want these back," he said and tossed them down on the counter, at the same time he reached into his right hand in and pulled out the wad of bills and proceeded to peel off four fifties.

"It only came to \$130.63, that's way too much," she protested.

“Keep the change, Margaret,” he replied. “You earned it.” With that, he reached over and picked up the bag containing his purchase. “Got to get going, believe it or not, there’s a poker game waiting for me,” he said, turning to leave.

“Why?” she asked.

“You were afraid, but you didn’t try to scream,” he said with his back to her. “In all these years, you are the only one who ever looked right at me, saw the truth and still treated me like I was still human.”

“What about these?” She held up the Ralph Lauren tees.

“Don’t like vermin,” he was walking away now. “Don’t matter if it’s the kind that scurries around on four legs or walks upright on two. Take care, Margaret.” Then he walked away, leaving through the front door. Only when he was gone did she realize that she had forgotten to finish ringing up the sale and give him the receipt. She quickly dismissed the idea of chasing after him; it seemed highly unlikely this sale would end up as a return.

She looked down at her watch and was surprised to see that barely ten minutes had passed since she had first noticed Mike Rose browsing among the Ralph Lauren shirts. Again, from far across the store came the laughter, nobody had seen a thing.

Thinking of Mike, Margaret remembered that he had yet to return from the Men’s room; she looked back down the hallway that lead to the public toilets, and saw no sign of him. The proper procedure would have been to call the manager on duty, they handled all suspected shoplifting incidents, but morbid curiosity got the better of her. Knocking on the Men’s room door got nothing more than silence. “Coming in,” she said and pushed the door open, only to find an empty room with a sink, a stall, and a urinal, side by side against a tile covered wall.

Then she saw it, bright crimson and the size of a quarter, on the floor just inside the stall and directly below a ceiling vent that was part of a heating system that led to the roof. It was blood and she had no doubt to whom it belonged. Making haste, she cranked the towel dispenser and tore off at least

three feet of coarse brown paper. Slightly wetting it at the sink, she knelt down and washed the drop of blood away then threw the towel in the trash. *If I'm asked no questions, then I won't have to tell any lies.* In all her years in retail, she had never had a \$70.00 tip, so wiping up that drop of blood seemed like the thing to do.

Days later, police officers investigating the disappearance of one Mike Rose, would question her about reports that he was seen entering Wilk Brothers about an hour before closing on that Monday night, the last time anybody saw him.

Margaret identified a picture of Mike and yes, she had seen him come in the store, browse and walk back in the direction of the public restrooms. Truthfully, she could answer that she had no idea where he had gone after that.

“People come in; people go out,” Margaret told the officers. “Some buy and some do not. You never know what’s going to come through the door.”

**The End**

If you enjoyed this story then check out my other short story, “Pick Your Poison” and my horror epic “Caden is Coming,” soon to be an ebook on Smashwords, where a prominent character from “You Never Know What’s Going to Come through the Door” turns up again.