

CHAPTER ONE

If you were able to pick any ten people in the country and ask them to close their eyes and imagine they were sitting in a Walmart parking lot, chances are they'd all conjure the same imagery. It is an "everywhere" that could be anywhere, a microcosm of America populated by shoppers and employees everyone believes they know.

In mid-October, 2011, I sat in my car outside Walmart #4450, cookie-cuttered into the Louisville suburban outland like any one of the 3,500, 24-hour superstores across the country. How long had I been sitting in that car—almost an hour?

Four miles from my house and I'd never even been inside the store. I didn't know anyone who went to Walmart. People I knew believed Walmart was the most villainous organization on the planet, the subject of every abusively disparaging socio-economic discussion across both the physical and cyber world. The wholesale shaming of the corporation, the employees, and the customers was enough to make people I knew drive on the opposite side of the highway.

As if triggered by my thoughts, a beat-up F-150 backed into the parking spot in front of me. Across the tailgate a sticker proclaimed, "Piss off a Liberal, Support the 2nd Amendment." As the driver of the truck turned to kick his door shut, I read his t-shirt declaration, "JESUS", Refresh Daily." Maybe Jesus was refreshed, but his grimy t-shirt hadn't. Classic Walmart.

How the hell did I get here? I'd done everything right. I graduated with two majors. I climbed the ladder for 30 years to a successful marketing career. I was a good mother, good daughter, good sister, and friend. Then BAM. In 2008 I lost my job and

over the next few years watched every drop of my savings, 401K, and self-esteem evaporate. Three years, in an endless blur of unemployment lines, and resumes sent day after day like messages in a bottle; not from a castaway but a cast-off. By 2011, I was broke, still unemployed and had maxed out everything there was to be maxed out in order to save the house and keep the lights on. And here I was praying Walmart would hire me.

I applied for a job at Walmart online and one day later they called me in for an interview. One day. The only thing I knew about the job was I needed to go to the back of the store to the employee entrance and ask for Kim or Nancy. I hoped I could find the door.

I believed the only predictable thing about this interview was that it was going to be bad. That's the thing about sustained hardship. Once you suffer a series of defeats, you begin to expect everything, even what might be a good thing, to turn around and bite. Getting an interview for a third-shift job at Walmart suggested there were teeth somewhere. I had myself nearly paralyzed with the thought of it.

And yet there I was, sitting in my car in a Walmart parking lot, dressed in a black Tahari pantsuit and heels, my Tumi briefcase balanced on my knees, waiting for the appointed time of my job interview. Today was the day that, if my luck finally returned, I'd become a third-shift Walmart stocker.

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The last time I wore this suit I was resplendent. I'd always wanted to work in marketing at a Fortune 500 company and I finally got an interview. The company sent me an airline ticket to their corporate headquarters. I spent eight hours meeting in every C-Suite feeling like a pageant contestant, going from talent contest to evening gown right

down to the soundproof booth.

By the time I got to the regional interview in Louisville, I knew the job was pretty much mine. I was met in the lobby of the newspaper by the VP of Marketing, ushered into a windowless room and seated opposite her at a table.

She was greasy, wrinkled, unkempt, uncouth and bloated to the extent of pushing down a belch with the back of her hand between every third sentence and sip from a can of diet Pepsi. I couldn't believe she was a VP.

She looked and smelled like she rarely bathed and had a habit of constantly running the lid of a Bick pen under her fingernails, chewing on the end when she was finished. She was everything anyone would be if they had no regard for anyone other than themselves.

To add to the total package, she was blatantly rude and inappropriate. Her voice creaked like the Wicked Witch of the West and I nervously expected to be called, "my pretty." She asked me how old I was, she asked me if I was married and had children, she asked me if I had a personal relationship with anyone at corporate and she spent the rest of the 30 minute discussion grilling me on what I should and shouldn't say to the publisher whom I would be meeting in minutes. She ended the interview with a loud derisive snort.

A call came for me to go to the publisher's office and she returned to the room with my portfolio that had arrived four days prior to my visit. She called for her assistant to cut the pull ties and packing tape. She made it clear she hadn't opened it and wasn't interested in reviewing my work. What did interest her was making my life a living hell for the next twelve years.

I read some place that there is nothing more mean and spiteful than when someone hates you for all the wrong reasons. This woman would give me many reasons to recall those words. I got the job but got more than I bargained for. Like my grandma was fond of saying, "Even if you get a pony, there's going to be shit in the barn."

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What a twisted turn of “then” and “now.” Two interviews so diametrically opposed on the food chain, yet both felt equal as life and death endeavors; then it was achievement, now it was survival. What a grand joke this time, for all my experience and education, to have little or no understanding of the company or the job. What did a Walmart stocker do other than put cans of soup on shelves? Well, it would just have to be enough.

As I counted down to the remaining 15 minutes before the interview I heard my mother’s voice in my head: “Never stop believing in the good of others and never stop believing in the good that you have in yourself.”

Would I ever be able to recognize good if it came along again? I looked down at my lap, feeling like I'd dressed in a ball gown for a ball game, and threw my briefcase on the floor of the car like it was on fire. Blow out the candles at the pity party. It was time to cross the Rubicon.

With that thought, I pulled a folder from my briefcase on the floor and walked across the lot and through the grocery entrance with the surrendering demeanor of a zombie slave. I walked past produce, I walked past pharmacy, past the towering aisles of grocery, past the baby clothes, past the kid’s clothes, past shoes, backed by the din of electronics and the staccato chirp of the checkout scanners, keeping rhythm with the click

of my Anne Klein shoes on the concrete.

In that long, faded blur of carts and screaming displays, under the cutting fluorescents, the Walmart world suddenly collapsed with a resounding "thwap" as I passed through the big rubber-edged doors marked "EMPLOYEES ONLY." I froze before the darkened hallways of a chaotic sprawl of merchandise, muck bins and makeshift everything.

I tried to get a sense of my surroundings, and I really froze at the entrance to the offices like a cat as it first enters a room. It was then that Kim and Nancy, the interview contacts, walked into the hallway.

One was probably ten years closer to middle age than the other. But they both wore Walmart shirts above khakis; both wore the same blue Maybelline liner, both topped off by identical curling-iron-fried, Aqua Net lacquered updos. They stared for the longest time, long enough to make me feel like I might have stumbled into the wrong place.

"You must be Lynn," they said almost in unison, introducing themselves, adding dollops of "sweetie" and "hon" in the crooning Kentucky patois. Each one took me by an arm patting me with hands decked out in French-tipped nails, all in a welcoming assurance that eased my apprehension. They ushered me through the door of a small windowless room and waved me into a plastic chair opposite the two of them, in front of their shared desk.

Behind them were an avalanche of binders, pigeonholes, and a towering assortment of every office stackable that could be contained to accommodate their assortment of printers, placards, pictures, and power strips. The premeditated mess on the

room had a cozy security to it, like a den in a forest, and I relaxed in spite of myself.

We sat for a while, on the surface going through an employment drill that we all tuned out as I examined them as much as they watched me. They took turns talking to me about the hiring process, in well-practiced “check-the-box” rhythm. Covertly, they glanced back and forth between each other, each glance from me to them to one another like a sequence of signals and codes created from years of working together in the same place.

Something about their similar style and the way they finished each other's sentences told me there was more to their relationship than 9-5 HR admins. These two women had a bond that surpassed sharing a cluttered metal desk in a room the size of a broom closet. They were Thelma and Louise. I could imagine them together outside the superstore, sharing a Marlboro, occasionally crossing state lines together to go to a roadhouse, sailing happily over a cliff in a late-model convertible; both with just the right combination of nice and hard, both with the face of someone who saw a lot of shit and took none of it.

Suddenly the two women stood at the same time, breaking the trance and ushering me from both sides down the hall, slipping a folder of forms under my arm. They were as unassuming as an old pair of loafers as they chattered down the dim hallway and gently deposited me into a padded chair in the middle of another windowless office, bare except for an empty desk with a chair on either side.

As I filled out the pile of introductory papers, I became aware the two women were studying me again, memorizing me, taking in every detail. I began to feel self-conscious as I went through all the forms, my third eye watching them watch me. They

were gathering details, I suspected, for a huge break room story that might even last for *weeks* if I got hired.

Once I finished the forms and the papers were stacked, they told me a manager would interview me “as soon as we can catch one,” Thelma said. It wasn't long before Louise caught one at the vending machines and brought him to the room.

That was the first time I saw Big Boy, an oversized man-child with a semi-permanent grin, destined to cheerfully purvey his benevolence no matter what nasty thing he said to the contrary. He lumbered in, scuffed back the chair and as I sat in front of him he went right to some papers he had in his hand and didn't even glance up at me. In return, I stared at him, big and meaty, his arms barely able to rest at his sides, with an engineered swirl of piled black hair that strained in height as much as his Walmart shirt did in elasticity. This was the guy that stood between bankruptcy and me?

He finally looked up after what seemed like forever and we went through stack after stack of files to double-check that I was a citizen, not a veteran of the military, not a felon, not disabled and able to lift 50 pounds. He explained the job briefly, went over the hours and a few of the rules.

"You get yer freight dropped off two-er-three times a night to where yer stationed, put it where it's 'posed to go at yer station, breakdown yer boxes and gather yer trash and gitit to the back and then zone and you'll find out what that means when ya git trained. One hour for lunch, all clock in an out with yer badge when you git one," he clicked out. I would have to go through some screening and training and then start a couple days, "if you drug test good. Only-if-yer-clean-on-the-screen." He smiled like he was imparting some clever hourly-wage jargon.

There was a nervous lull in the interview and following what felt like a very long pause, Big Boy leaned way back in his cushioned chair, one foot on the desk and one hand on the papers. What now? Did I have the job? Did he think I wouldn't be "clean-on-the-screen"; for Christ's sake, I had on a Movado watch that probably cost more than his car.

He looked at me like he knew what I was thinking and, suddenly raising his voice, said, "And you're not hired yet; this hire isn't over until you get *the final question*." He let the quiet roll out for effect and raised his Big Gulp to his mouth, swigging down to the sound of the straw sucking the bottom of the cup. It seemed like we both held our breath, neither of us sure, which would come first, the final question or the belch.

Finally, giving me his best know-it-all grin, he continued. "Do you remember doing something at work..." here he paused to look at the form, following along with his finger on the page, "...that-was-recognized-as-GOOD." He leaned in close, emphasizing the last word in case I didn't catch it.

What? I froze. I had nothing. I couldn't think of anything GOOD I'd done that could apply to this job. What was GOOD at Walmart? I could show up on time. I could be polite and courteous. I could probably lift more than 50 pounds. But a former work achievement? Well, let's see... I increased annual revenue from \$400,000 to \$1.8 million in my last position. I created a message matrix across integrated media platforms. No doubt that would come in handy stocking the condom aisle on Sunday morning.

That was the type of smarty-bitch, executive story I used in other interviews—real interviews for real jobs. Big Boy grinned at me, like he already thought I was some smarty bitch. He looked like a cat on a porch watching a wounded bird. What was only

seconds seemed like I'd been fishing for an answer forever. I started to think I was going to blow it. Jesus, I was going to blow a job interview at Walmart.

Then like a shot to the brain, I remembered. We collected "GOOD" stories all the time for our department reviews, and monthly and annual reports. In my "other life," we were always working on marketing stories—heroic, death-defying, company-saving stories that showed our initiative and commitment. My colleagues and I called this type of example, "The Flaming Baby." Big Boy wanted a Flaming Baby story. The particulars might be different, but the idea was the same: extraordinary effort and service.

As the time ticked out like a game show question, I concocted a Flaming Baby that demonstrated my skill for catching dropped balls, keeping customers, and making my boss look good. I sketched in the darkest hour, I outlined the lost opportunity, and I painted in the lines to my "Hail Mary" pass that saved the day. With all the submissive humility I could manufacture, I ended the story with a smile and an "I-Got-This" nod. It felt good to feel proud of myself after all this time.

That's when all the air started to leave the room and shimmering oasis of my story started to fade. I looked across the desk and realized Big Boy been doodling on the desk pad the whole time I'd been talking. He'd never even heard my "Flaming Baby" story, never even intended to listen. I got a little panicky. I could feel my heart revving, my breath shortening. In an instant sweat was leaking down the insides of my arms; at least my blazer would shield me from the shame of visible pit stains. I was trying to get a job at Walmart and I might not get it. I sat there holding my stupid folder, staring down at my stupid business shoes, wondering what I'd ever done in my whole stupid polished career to ever deserve this.

Just as I could feel the first burn of tears, just as I was preparing for my tragic defeat, there was the nearly sonic sound of Big Boy's stomach growling. It rolled like the thunder of a storm inside the little room. As if it were a signal our time was up, he leaned over the desk, signed the final form and punctuated the end of our interview with a snort. An audible snort. A signal to himself, nobody, and me; he didn't give a shit. I was hired. No approval would ever be demonstrated. Somewhere, someplace, I heard a country song play deep in the back room of my recollection. I think it's called, "Same Ride, Different Rodeo" with the chorus, "... and there's going to be shit in the barn."

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Twenty minutes later, after peeing in three different cups, I was back in the car in the same parking space. I looked in the rearview mirror, smiled at myself, and said, "I did it. I got a job." We could keep the house and the lights on. Wolf from the door... we'd have to give that some thinking. But for now, it was a big relief.

I sat behind the wheel staring at the giant Walmart sign, illuminating in the quickening dusk of fall. I let it all sink in and fear slowly elucidated in pace with the brightening fluorescents. I still had to work in a Walmart in a Walmart shirt with Walmart people. The idea of seeing myself in that picture was nearly as terrifying as the possibility of it being seen by someone I knew. Dread swooped down to take squatter's roost in my stomach as I turned the key in the car and drove out of the lot as if being chased by a monster.