

J O E S I X P A C K

***HIS
STRANGEST
DESIRE***

**“Employee of the Month”
Story & Illustrations by Joe Six-Pack
A Tales of Transformation Story**



2012 Digital Edition

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EMPLOYEE OF THE MONTH

“Guh-*what?*” Sharon shrieked, lunging forward in her seat in a mass of blonde hair, earrings and white-hot shock.

“As I just said, Mick is our new employee of the month,” said Penny, who was leading this employee meeting.

It may not have ranked up there with the news that Kennedy had been shot, or the moment you learned the space shuttle had been lost, but this news was just as destructive to Sharon’s life. She had been Employee of the Month at Blaine’s Apparel Exchange for twenty-seven months in a row. She counted on it, expected it and earned it.

Hell, her entire reason for being depended on it. Without the Employee of the Month award, she couldn’t reassure customers that she was the expert of the store. Without the award she couldn’t lord over the other employees in her condescending manner. Without the award, she lost the fifty dollar bonus she used to buy herself shoes.

She had never really had to ask herself the most horrific question of her existence: “Without being employee of the month, who *is* Sharon Mulkowski?” Did she have an answer to that? No. No, she didn’t.

As the Store Manager of Blaine’s Apparel Exchange, Penny Feldman was well aware that her announcement had just sucked the air out of the room. Of the eight employees, they were all paralyzed into a stupor. Penny had just set off a weapon of mass destruction and everyone was reeling in its’ wake. It was a rare moment in which Penny actually had everyone’s full attention.

At the back of the room, there stood Mick, who was reeling just as much as anyone. Not only was Mick Alderson not aware he was in the running for Employee of the Month, but he wasn’t even aware there was such a thing. He had been working here for over five months, but he rarely showed up for these mandatory employee meetings, and when he did, he just stood in the back and tuned out.

But with this startling announcement, Mick was so phased that he nearly stopped texting his friend on his cell phone. Nearly.

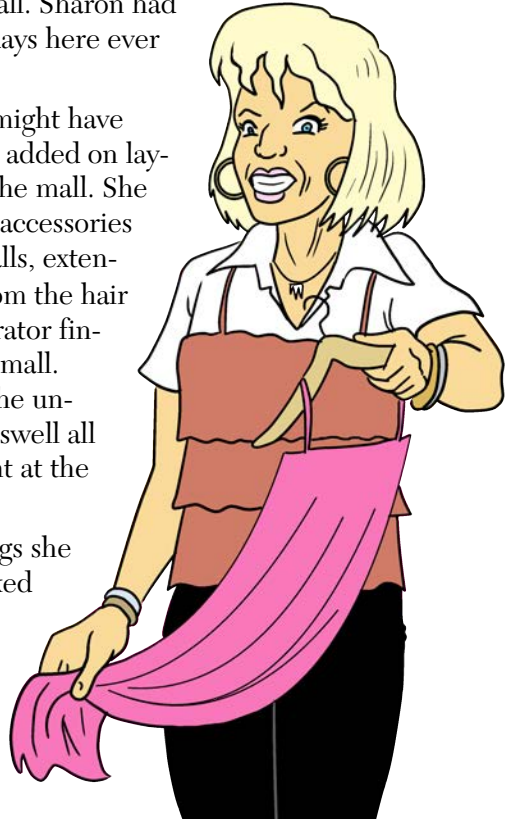
“You can’t do that!” Sharon wailed. “That’s not how it’s supposed to work!” She was a flurry of anger as she got to her feet, ready to throw a classic Sharon temper tantrum.

Sharon was about 28, taking classes at the local junior college. She was training to be a famous actress – and also a medical records keeper if the acting didn’t work out. She’d been working at the store for well over two years, and had worked at three other stores in this very same mall before that. She was

kind of a creature formed for, and by, the mall. Sharon had gowned up in the area and spent most of her days here ever since she was able to buy a bus pass.

She looked like it, too. At some point, she might have been a naturally attractive girl. But then she added on layers and layers of make up, purchased from the mall. She wore the earrings, necklaces, bracelets, and accessories she purchased from the mall. She had the falls, extensions, highlighting, styling, and dyed hair from the hair salon, located in the mall. She had the decorator fingernails and toenails that she also got at the mall. She wore the excessively gaudy shoes with the unnecessary high heels that caused her feet to swell all day long. Shoes, you might guess, she bought at the mall.

Every inch of her body was covered in things she had purchased at the mall. Sharon was cloaked in cheap Chinese clothes sold at expensive mall prices. The fashion mannequins in the store windows that changed from week to week to her were avatars in high holy temples. Whatever was in fashion, and in season, was in Sharon's closet.



Unless, of course, it was tasteful, refined, and simple. That wasn't what Sharon was into. The more spangly, sparkly, embroidered, and complicated the garment, the better.

When you saw the complete package, what you saw was a living, walking embodiment of successful marketing and unquestioned consumerism more than an actual person.

That was probably for the best, because Sharon was not all that pleasant an actual person to deal with. Sure, she was all smiles when she was dealing with a customer – even pleasant – but there was just something in her innate essence that was condescending and petty, and it was never far from the surface.

Right now, that pettiness was about to burst from her like a container of potato salad left in a hot car.

“You. Can't. Do. This. To. Me!” Sharon growled at Penny, her boss.

But Penny was too smart to let this get out of hand right now. “Not right now, Sharon. After the meeting. We'll talk about it after the meeting,” she said, trying to sound as authoritative as possible. It seemed to work, as Sharon folded her arms in a huff, and then dropped back down into her chair with a look of disgust on her face.

The store manager then continued. “I’ve given this award a lot of thought this month, and I think that Mick deserves recognition for all the intangibles he brings to our store.”

Mick, who had put the phone away and was paying attention for once, was as frightened as a mouse when the other eight in the room started to applaud him. Mick was a pretty simple guy, and not the sharpest tool in the box. Most of his days he spent smoking weed with his friends, and playing video games. His parents had tossed him out of the house year ago, and that was the reason he had this job. He preferred living alone, and didn’t want a roommate. To cover the rent, he had to take a job here in the mall.

He hated the mall. It was a monument to conspicuous consumption. The stores were staffed with pretty girls who were shallow and stupid. They worked crazy hours just for some dumb discount on clothes and they were grateful for the opportunity. They were whores for money and deserved to be treated like crap, as far as he was concerned.

Mick was also the only male who worked at the store. The store sold a mix of men’s and women’s fashions, but leaned heavily on the women’s side. Mick’s sales numbers were never good, but they didn’t have to be. He was there primarily to sell the small assortment of men’s clothing, and to fulfill laws on gender discrimination.

Which also meant that it was very tough to fire Mick, because he was a necessary part of the business, and no one wanted to have to hire another guy. Especially Penny. She hated interviewing guys.

So Mick had lucked into a job he could basically skate through most of the time. And Mick was a fine skater.

Sharon walked up to him with a digital camera. “Smile!” she said. Then a flash. “For the plaque,” Sharon explained.

Every month, a new plaque was put out, a framed picture of the employee of the month. It was fairly prominently displayed, right next to the



cash register, which was central in the store. It was hard to miss.

Once that was over with, Penny drew the meeting to a close. Everybody was happy to leave, as it was Sunday night, and they all had things they wanted to do. They all shuffled off, except for Sharon, who was waiting for the store to clear before she launched into the diatribe she was planning to deliver.

“Before you go nuts, let me explain,” Penny said, trying to head off Sharon’s anger.

“What are you doing?” Sharon howled. “Have you lost your mind? That piece of shit stoner is the most useless thing in this store!”

“Look, Sharon, I don’t have to explain myself to you. I’m your boss,” Penny replied. “The only reason I want to have this conversation is because I believe I owe you a courtesy for all the hard work you’ve put in here.”

“You’re damn right you do,” Sharon said. “No one here can match my experience, and no one here can touch my dedication! None of you can even approach my level of perkiness!”

Penny flashed Sharon an angry glance, as she was tempted to tell Sharon to shove it. She clearly deserved it. But Penny had a plan. “Sharon, it doesn’t do the morale of this team any good to have the same person win the award every single month. I need to build morale.” Penny lowered her voice to a ‘confidential’ level. “And frankly, Sharon, you need to see this as an opportunity. An opportunity to raise your game to the next level. It’s a challenge to you to win that award next month, and show everyone who the best salesperson in the store really is. I know you can do it. You’re Blaine’s Apparel Exchange *management* material. Now prove it.”



The next morning, as Penny arrived at the store a half hour before opening, she was greeted by Rebecca, the regional manager for Blaine’s Apparel Exchange. In other words, her boss. “Good morning, Penny. I bet you can guess why I’m here,” Rebecca said.

“Sharon, right?”

“You got it.”

Penny unlocked the door, and the two went into the dark store. Both held steaming cups of coffee they were sipping from.

“She must’ve left 15 messages on my phone,” Rebecca said. “So why don’t you tell me what the story is?”

“She’s just being difficult. I don’t know if you are aware of who she is, but she’s this girl, here.” The two had arrived the back of the store, in the hallway to the

managers office. That hallway was lined with dozens of pictures of past employees of the month. More than half of them were of Sharon.

Rebecca was impressed. “She’s been here a while.”

“She was working here when I got the job. Anyway, she’s been the employee of the month for the past 27 months, and this month I gave it to somebody else.”

“So she’s having trouble accepting she’s not number one?”

“No. She is number one. She’s my top seller.”

“I don’t get it.”

“Reverse psychology,” Penny said.

“Reverse psychology?”

“Reverse psychology. You know, when you tell somebody something and hope to get the opposite reaction of what you expect.”

“Explain it to me.”

“Sharon is easily my most successful salesperson, but she’s coasting. Mick is my least successful salesperson, and he has no drive to improve. By giving him the award, I might motivate him to do better. Sort of live up to the award. And with Sharon, I motivate her to do better to win it back.”

“This doesn’t sound fair to Sharon.”

“Sharon’s this close to getting let go.” Penny said, pinching her fingers. “Her attitude has gotten worse every month. She acts like she owns the place, doesn’t adjust well to change, and worse, she undermines my authority.”

Rebecca sipped her coffee, pausing to think about that. “The Employee of the Month program is designed to motivate our sales associates, so I suppose if it works, it’s all right.” Rebecca smiled a half-hearted smile. “But it better work.”

Penny nodded in agreement.



As fate would have it, both Sharon and Mick were starting their afternoon shifts at the same time that day. And by ‘fate,’ it’s meant to refer to the all-determining oracle of the future, the posted weekly schedule that Penny made. It was almost as if she had planned it this way.

Looking at the clock, and remaining cool to Mick, Sharon was counting down the last few minutes until she was going on the sales floor. That was when Penny appeared from her office, and carried out the new framed picture and plaque for Employee of the Month. She removed the old one of Sharon, tossed it aside, and put Mick’s in its’ place.

A quick glance back to the hallway revealed the sizzling hot glare of Sharon. This was exactly what Penny had hoped for.

“What’s goin’ on?” Mick asked, as he tucked in his rumpled dress shirt into his lint-ridden corduroys.

“Penny’s putting up your employee of the month award at the counter,” Sharon said, through clenched teeth.

Mick took a look for himself. “Whoa, that’s awesome,” he said. “No hard feelings, right?”

“No hard feelings?” Sharon screeched. “You just stay out of my way and maybe you can keep your crummy job!”

“Huh? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“That means I’ll do everything I can to get you kicked out of this store if you don’t back off!”

“Whoa. Major bad vibes,” Mick replied.

“Whoooooa,” Sharon mocked. “You still smell like skunk, pothead.”

“Who says I can’t out-sell you?”

“Don’t make me laugh. You couldn’t sell crack to a street whore.”

“Hey. Maybe I can out-sell you, you know. You shouldn’t be like that.”

Sharon cackled. “I’d like to see that, freak.”

“Game on!” Mick said, before leaving for the sales floor.



Mick spent the next few hours of his shift muttering things under his breath. He was normally a pretty laid-back guy, but Sharon had pushed his buttons exactly the wrong way.

He had never really dealt with Sharon like the other employees had, but all of a sudden, he understood why everybody called her ‘top bitch.’

Although he tried to keep to his corner of the store, the menswear section, Mick couldn’t help but steal glances over at Sharon. There was no question she was a pro. She sold clothes as easily as breathing air. She cloaked her shark-like selling abilities with a syrupy sheen of artificial smiles and synthetic warmth. Mick had an impulse to interrupt each customer she was assisting and warn them about her. “Run while you still can!”

At this particular moment, she had just finished helping a frumpy mom, and sent her to the cash register with her arms loaded with clothes. As she did, she saw Mick was watching, and threw a self-satisfied toothy smile of spite back at him.

“Excuse me, do these pants come in a 42?” A man said, who had wandered in while Mick was preoccupied.

“Hey, we got what we got,” Mick replied. He pointed at the stack of folded pants and shrugged. “Look real good, sometimes they get buried in the pile.”

“Yeah, uh, thanks,” said the man as he turned away.

Mick continued to ignore his customers and pay attention the Sharon, and it wasn't lost on Penny, who was watching from the back of the store. She figured she had to help Mick along.

“Hi Mick, have any good customer interactions?” Penny asked, as she approached him.

“Just, you know, the usual,” Mick replied. “I think someone bought a sweater or something.”

Penny sighed. Mick needed a good sharp kick in the ass. Unfortunately, she could only do it in a metaphorical sense. “I want you to know how much I appreciate all you do for the team, Mick.”

Mick was not used to being praised. The only people who ever talked to him like this were his old high school guidance counselors, who were always telling him he was ‘full of potential’ and he was ‘ready to blossom.’

Penny turned on the charm. “What I'm most impressed with is how you apply our ‘Now THABT'S Service!’ system,” she said.

The “Now THABT'S Service!” system was an anagram for helping customers at Blaine's Apparel Exchange:

Tell the customer about our great sales and specials

Hear what they want

Assist them to find it

go **B**eyond the sale

Take them to the register, then say...

“**S**ee you soon and have a great Blaine's kind of day.”

Not that Mick much cared. He had noticed a few posters in the back that said something about a system, but as far as he was concerned, if people were gonna buy stuff, they were gonna buy stuff. He was just there to make sure nobody stole things and to answer customer's stupid questions.

Penny patted Mick on the back, literally. “Super customer service begins with super people like you, Mick.”

“Are you sure you're talking about me?” Mick asked. He still didn't understand how this Employee of the Month thing happened.

“I’m talking about the person I know is the best salesperson in this store,” Penny said. She then headed back to her office.

Mick wasn’t sure what to think. Did Penny really believe what she was saying? She was a professional, after all, and had worked with a lot of salespeople. Maybe she was right.

“That didn’t take long,” Sharon said, passing by Mick. “Only three hours of being Employee of the Month and the manager has to have a word with you. Good work.” She quickly walked away to avoid a comeback.

“I’m looking for this in tan,” a man said, who approached Mick with a maroon button-up shirt.

“What?” Mick replied, having had his head elsewhere. “What we got is what we got,” he told the customer.

The man scowled.

“But that maroon is exactly what you’re looking for,” Mick quickly added. “I see you as more of a rugged outdoorsy kinda guy, am I right?”

“Uh, yeah, I suppose so,” the man replied. He was dressed in a tie and flimsy dress shirt that screamed ‘pencil pusher middle manager on lunch break,’ but he agreed. “I like doing things outdoors.”

“Yeah, that’s what I’m talking about. Maroon makes a powerful statement.” Mick saw the man’s expression become skeptical. “But not too bold. Kind of powerful, but restrained power.”

The man took a second look at the shirt. “You think so?”

“Maroon’s the color a lot of people are buying. I think it’s the color of the season.” Mick guided the man over to the cash register as they talked. The truth was, that they only had that shirt in maroon, and if he wanted to make a sale, it was that color or nothing.

“Hey, you’re employee of the month,” the man said, spying the large plaque next to the register. That observation filled him with confidence. “You must know your stuff. I’ll take it.”

“Great! I’m sure you’ll love it, dude,” Mick said, returning to his station.

As he walked back to his station, Mick was having a small crisis of conscience. He had always considered himself different from everybody else who worked here. He wasn’t like the other sell-outs. Why had he just been all customer-servicey with that guy? He couldn’t understand why.

The man carried his final purchase out in a shopping bag, and waved it back to Mick as he left. “Thanks again,” he said.

Mick waved back, “See you soon and have a great Blaine’s kind of day!” Mick nearly grabbed his mouth in shock. This was so unlike him.

“Think you can out sell me?” Sharon said, coming over to confront Mick. She put her hands on her hips, as if she was physically challenging him.

Mick suddenly forgot all about his introspection and turned to face her. “Watch me.”



That night, Mick was playing Call of Warfare 3 on the Live network with his friend Sly. “Which ridge do you want to take?” He asked over his headphones.

“Go for the left one. That looks easier,” Sly replied.

“So like I was saying, dude, this job of mine is dumb.” Mick mowed down an infantryman, slicing him I two with a machine gun. “I think I might quit.”

Sly offered his astute commentary. “Jobs suck. I wouldn’t work if I didn’t need the money.”

“Yeah, they just made me employee of the month, too.”

“Wow, I thought you hated working there.”

“I do. It’s kind of hard to explain.”

Sly launched a grenade, taking out a water tower and the snipers on top of it. “But only douchebag frauds get named employee of the month.”

“I know! That’s why it sucks! I don’t want to be one of those guys. This job is like, everything I hate, and it’s like they’re trying to make me one of them.”

“Yeah, it sucks.” Sly picked off another sniper on top of a nearby house. “Totally sucks.”

“They think this is what I want. They think I want to become like some big salesman guy. But then there’s this girl who works there, Sharon. She’s a total bitch.”

“Yeah, it sucks.” Sly shot a gunman right between the eyes.

“She’s trying to fuck with me. She’s all, like, freaking out, dude. She’s, like, losing her mind or something over the award.”

“Yeah, it sucks.”

“Dude, are you even listening me?”

“Yeah, sure I was. What were you saying?”

Mick was ticked off. “I gotta go.” He said, and logged off immediately.



The next day, Mick arrived for his shift a half hour early. His first stop was checking in with Penny in her office. “Do you have a second?” He asked.

Penny, who was working on the schedule for next week, turned her head to see that Mick was dressed in a nice, clean dress shirt and dark grey dress slacks. He even may have combed his mop of hair. Mick was trying to look professional, much to her excitement. “What’s up?” She answered.

“Penny, this whole award thing is freaking me out,” Mick said. “Every time I see Sharon, I think she wants to claw my eyes out.”

“Sometimes people are threatened by success, Matt. They can’t handle strong competition. Someone like you, who can stand up to her and challenge her makes her scared.”

“Scared?”

“She sees in you what I see in you, Mick. You’re more than capable of becoming the dominant salesperson this store. With just a little focus, I think you could really teach Sharon a lesson.”

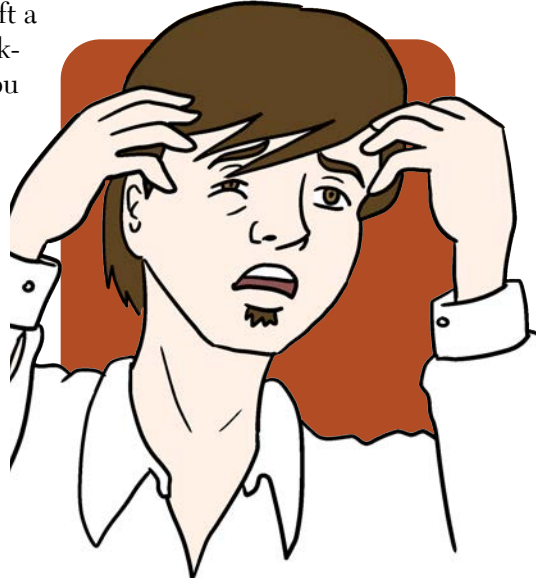
“Really?” Mick had to admit, the thought of teaching Sharon a lesson had its appeal to it. *A lot* of appeal to it.

“Absolutely.” Thinking the conversation was over, Penny turned back to her scheduling. But Mick was still standing there. “Is there anything else?”

“So, yeah. You know how you said that we should come in early once and a while to watch training videos?” Mick asked. His expression was little hard to describe. His face seemed to be stuck somewhere in between determination and confusion. It was almost as if part of him didn’t understand what he was doing.

“Oh, really?” Penny replied. She had been saying that for years, however no one had ever taken her up on the offer. “Yeah, we can do that. Penny reached over to a filing cabinet, opened up one of the drawers and picked out a DVD. “This one it was made especially for Employee of the Month winners.” She then blew the dust from it, and then put it into a computer. “Just have a seat, here.”

For the next 20 minutes, Mick sat quietly as he attentively watched the training video.



“Congratulations,” the video said, “You’re now one of the elite. Not just a member of the Blaine’s Apparel Exchange family, but one of the leaders.

“Blaine’s Apparel Exchange is a worldwide leader in fashion retailing, helping millions of customers make fashionable choices to fit their lifestyle every day.

“But Blaine’s Apparel Exchange is nothing without it’s most important asset. You. Our company is all about our people. And if you’ve made it this far, to become Employee of the Month, you’ve proven yourself to be among the best.

“But beyond just being a sales performer, you represent Blaine’s Apparel Exchange – and it’s important to comply with our corporate standards of personal appearance. Strive to look professional at all times. Fortunately, as an employee of the month, you’re entitled to a generous discount on all of Blaine’s products. In addition, keeping your face and hands clean and free of blemishes, is mandatory. Remember, you’re now a leader. And leaders perform great when they look great.”

The video went on for another 15 minutes or so, largely reinforcing the same points over and over again. Fortunately, they had a great audience in Mick, who was very easily swayed. Years of smoking marijuana had made him somewhat impressionable.

“So what did you think?” Penny asked, as she was corporately mandated to ask after every training video.

“Yeah, I guess it all makes sense. Kinda,” Mick replied, in a daze.

“What did you learn?”

“Well, they went over the steps of service, which I guess is cool, and then they said I was a leader or something...”

Penny’s enthusiasm started to wane. Mick’s recap of the video made it sound like he hadn’t paid much attention and had little interest.

“Oh, I did have a question,” Mick said. “When you’re overcoming customer objections to product availability, do we want to send them to the website so they can get the product delivered to them at home, or should we give them a rain check?”

Hallelujah! Penny sang in her head. It was working! “Rain check first and then direct them to the website if they still have objections.”

“Okay, I got it.”

Penny felt great. Her plan seemed to be actually succeeding, even better than she thought it might. Mick, for the first time, was showing some interest in his job. In fact, he had just shown, in one question, more interest than most of the people already working there.

She needed to give him a reward. “I almost forgot! As a part of the Employee of the Month program, you’re entitled to a mall discount.”

“We already get a mall discount, like, 10%, right?” Mick asked.

“Of course. But the special Employee of the Month discount is 50%. And some stores will even let you have stuff for free.”

“Awesome,” Mick said. His eyes lit up. Penny handed him the discount card and Mick took it eagerly.

“But it’s only good for this month.”

“I guess I’ll just have to win it again next month,” Mick replied.

This was fantastic, Penny thought to herself. *He’s actually starting to get engaged in being a sales associate*. If there was a Nobel prize for sales training, she would have been on the short list.



Friday morning, Mick arrived for his appointment at the mall salon. His shift was in two hours, so he had some time. He felt a little uncomfortable in his new black patent leather dress shoes. He was also adjusting to his crisp new white dress shirt. He had bought for a ridiculously low price. With the employee of the month discount, it almost felt like he was losing money if he didn’t buy things.

The same went for the salon appointment. It was almost free. No, not quite free, but so cheap, he had to make it. What Mick wanted to do was try and look a little bit more professional when he was on the sales floor. He figured a nice haircut would do the job.

The salon, “Modern Clips,” wasn’t very large, with only three chairs, and it was empty right now.

There was just one lone employee, who was examining her long, black hair in a hand mirror, and making a kissy face. As soon as she realized she had a customer, she put the mirror away. “Welcome to modern clips,” she said with a smile. “Do you have an appointment?”

“I’m Mick.”

“Oh yes, Mick. I’ve seen you around here a lot.”

“I work at Blaine’s.”

“That’s where I’ve seen you. My name is Carla. What can I do for you today?” She was tall and lanky, and obviously spent a ton of time on her makeup and hair. She looked kind of like a cross between Cleopatra and... Sarah Jessica Parker? She was at least dressed well in a cobalt blue sweater dress and black leggings.

“So, I’ve never been to a real salon before, so I guess... Do whatever you do at a salon.”



“Okay, let me ask another question. Is this for a date? Or maybe for a photo?”

“Nah, nothing like that. I just need to look good for my job.”

“The professional fashion consultant look.” Carla checked the reservation on her computer. “Oh, I see you’re using the discount.”

“Is that okay?”

“That’s great! That means cost isn’t going to be an issue. So we can do just about anything and everything.”

“So, yeah. I guess. Do I need to sit down?”

“Oh my God, you are new to this, aren’t you? That’s so precious. Just have a seat here and leave it all to Carla.”

It was only a minute before Mick was introduced to the pleasure of having someone work on your hair. Letting a woman run her fingers through a warm shampoo of your hair was worth whatever he was paying for this.

Mick hoped this would make a difference. He knew now that he represented Blaine’s Apparel Exchange and it was up to him to put forward his best look. He was a leader now, and great leaders needed to look great. Besides, if this could help him beat Sharon, he would do it.

He knew so little about what Carla was doing, he just kept quiet and let her do her thing. As he closed his eyes and was alone with his thoughts, he couldn’t help but run through revenge fantasies with Sharon. He pictured her, on her knees, begging to keep her job in the face of being blown to bits by Mick’s sales abilities.

His eyes popped open when he realized how twisted his imagination was getting.

Carla was hovering around his head putting some kind of paste to his hair. *She’s the expert*, he thought.

At least he thought that before he felt a poke above his eye. “What was that?”

“Plucking your eyebrows,” Carla said. “Just a few.

They're all scraggly.”

“Really?”

“Oh yeah.”

“This is really fancy!” Mick declared.

“You are *adorable!*” Carla told him.

Eventually, Carla was done with his hair, and waited for it to “set,” whatever that meant. Then she turned her attention to Mick’s fingernails. She gave him a full manicure. Mick wasn’t even aware of what a manicure was, and he wasn’t sure he liked it, but it was something to do while they waited. Carla even showed him how to use a nail file and deal with cuticles.

The moment finally came, and Carla whirled Mick around in the chair to take a look at her work.

Mick grimaced at his reflection. He took a long look through squinted eyes. He then looked up at Carla, skeptically. “Seriously?” He asked.

Mick’s hair had been lightened dramatically, with his dark brown now a honey color. The front had been combed over neatly, parted to the side. The back, however, looked just as long as it did when he got here. For a haircut, there wasn’t a lot of actual cutting of hair. It just looked cleaner and well-kept.

It also had streaks running through it that were very blonde. Added to his suddenly sharper and narrower eyebrows, and the change was dramatic.

“Well, I guess it *does* look more professional,” Mick said.

Carla was eager to explain her masterpiece. “I was going for the sophisticated European look. Kind of like David Beckham. Just right for selling fashion.”

Mick had no idea who David Beckham was, so he just smiled back, as if he understood. “How many days before the color washes out?”

“Washes out? That’s bleach, darling. Bleach doesn’t wash out. You’ll want to drop by every so often so I can clean up the roots, too.”

Mick had absolutely no clue what



gardening had to do with his hairstyle. “So I’ve got to live with this?”

“Oh, I know it’s a big change, sweetie. But trust me, this is exactly what you need.”

“I think it’s weird.”

Carla was very sure herself. “I tell you what, if you don’t sell more today, looking like you do, then come right back here and I’ll put everything back, as best I can.”

That sounded reasonable to Mick. “Deal.”

“You’re not mad at me, are you?” Carla asked.

“Nah, I’m not paying enough to be mad about it. Besides, I figure I can try anything once.”

“Great. I like you, Mick. You’re all right.” Carla kissed him on the cheek.

Mick blushed, as if it were the first time any woman had ever kissed him. It was just the kind of reaction Carla was hoping for. “I’m going to pencil you in for every Thursday. Sound good?”

“I guess,” Mick replied.



Sharon was going out of her tiny mind. She had just come off the sales floor at the end of her shift, and was looking over the computer report. It showed the sales percentages for everybody who worked at Blane’s Apparel Exchange.

Her sales were down. Not much, but a little. It didn’t help that the clothes the store was stocking had been changing so much lately. She wasn’t very good with these younger styles, and preferred selling to older women.

What really sent steam shooting out her ears was what that idiot Mick was doing. Three days ago, when he showed up with that ridiculous hair and dressed up like a low rent underwear model, she laughed in his face. But his sales were climbing at a crazy rate.

Sharon was out-selling Mick, but it wouldn’t be for long. His numbers were starting to scare her. She was determined to win that award back, but even if things stayed as they were, the massive increase alone was reason enough for Penny to give it that fool again.

There was no way on this earth she was going to allow that moron to beat her in any contest. She had been working this job for over two and a half years, and had poured everything into it. This was her store, and her territory. She had every right to being Employee of the Month. No little stoner toad was ruining her good thing.

She stormed into the manager's office. "I know what you're up to, Penny."

The manager turned to address her employee. "Pardon?"

"You don't think I can tell what's going on, but I know the truth," Sharon said, coolly.

"You'll have to be more specific, Sharon."

"I know why you gave Mick Employee of the Month."

"Yes, because he's got the potential..."

"Don't give me that!" Sharon rudely interrupted. "You're sleeping with him, aren't you! That's why you gave him the award!"

Penny looked blankly at Sharon and said nothing.

Realizing how ridiculous her accusation was, Sharon immediately backed off. "Or something!" She added.

"Let's agree to take some quality time to reflect, okay?" Penny suggested. "Why don't we spend some time reconsidering and then revisit your concerns at a later time?"

Penny just scowled. "I'm going home," she said, and left. She grabbed her enormous high-maintenance purse and stormed out of the store.

She passed by her regular salon, "Modern Clips," and on a whim, went inside. "Carla, I need some salon therapy," she said. As a regular, she had known Carla ever since she had started working there. "Give me the works."

Carla never liked her sessions with Sharon, and didn't like the idea of spending the next hour with her. But a job was a job. "Work getting you down?" Carla asked.

Sharon tossed her bag aside and helped herself to sitting in the chair. "I need to look like a million bucks."

"Don't I always?" Carla replied.

"I need something even more spectacular. I need to beat that idiot Mick, and I need to look my best to do it. So step up your game."

Carla certainly didn't like that comment. But she didn't expect much better from Sharon. "So you know Mick?"

"Unfortunately," Sharon grumbled.

For just a brief moment, Carla picked up her electric shears and thought about just shaving all of Sharon's hair off. Mick was a nice guy, and only someone of Sharon's limited intellect could possibly find that boy anything but charming and delightful, in her opinion.

"What are you waiting for?" Sharon scolded. "I don't have all day."

No, Carla decided she wasn't going to shave her hair off. She was smarter than that. She had a much better, much more insidious idea.



It was another busy Saturday afternoon at the store, and the place was packed with customers. The weekends at this mall were always dead busy, with customers coming to fill the void in their souls with frozen yogurt, soft pretzels and sweatshop-made garments. Today was no exception.

Shoppers at Blaine's Apparel Exchange weren't exactly busting down the door, but they every time Mick turned around, there was someone there needing assistance.

He admitted to himself that Carla was right about the hair. The new look had certainly improved his sales. His tallies and metrics were becoming more than a match for Sharon.

He figured that was the reason Sharon had adopted her new look as well, to try and keep up. She had caked on the makeup, her face a shade darker than the rest of her skin. Her eyes were heavily lined with eyeliner and her mascara'd eyes looked like black caterpillars on her eyelids.

Sharon had also changed her hairstyle, from her wavy long blonde to straight style that had a bit more body.

To match the new look, Sharon had also gone into overdrive when it came to customer service. She was smiling and laughing as if there was a nearby leak of laughing gas that was only affecting her.

"See you soon and have a great Blaine's kind of day!" Sharon sang to her latest customer, as they left the store. As soon as she had said the words, another customer was already in her sights.

Mick knew that the competition was now in high gear. "Welcome to Blaine's Apparel Exchange!" Mick said, approaching a man who was examining a sweater. That was step "T" in the "Now THABT'S Service" system. "Let me tell you all about our Super Savings Pre Arbor Day sale!"

"I'm just looking for a sweater," the man replied, dismissing Mick immediately.

"So, I understand that you're looking for a sweater, am I right?" Mick said, executing a textbook step 'H.'

"Yeah, that's what I said."

Time for step 'A.' "I'd be happy to help you find just the sweater you're looking for."

"Fine. Something that will look good for a guy like me and isn't too expensive." The customer didn't seem to be that impressed with the "THABT'S" system so far.

Mick quickly picked up the first sweater he saw, and held it up. "I think this is just what you're looking for. It's got a great..."

"No," the man said,

"Okay..." Mick then grabbed another style. "Here's one that everyone says..."

"No."

This was getting frustrating fast. It was time to break out the secret weapon: questions. "Is there anything in particular you're looking for?" Mick asked.

"No," was the answer. "Just something that's in style."

"How about this one?" Mick said, holding up another sweater.

"Look, I'll just browse a little, okay?" The man said, turning away.

Nick was disappointed. He had done everything the right way. He been helpful, suggestive, sympathetic, and had offered the best of what they had in the store. But he still couldn't close a sale.

The next time that Mick looked around, the customer had vanished. He left without making a purchase. Even worse, when Nick looked over at Sharon, he couldn't help but notice she had gone through three complete sales in the same amount of time he had lost his.



"So she's selling even more, hmm?" Carla said, as she applied some peroxide to Mick's roots.

Mick was depressed. "She's unstoppable. If she wins that dumb award, I think I'll just quit. Man, I don't want to work with her anyway. Working blows."

"Oh, come on. Cheer up!" Carla chirped.

"I don't know what I hate more that she can sell those stupid clothes like crazy, or that I suck so much at it."

"Now you don't suck," Carla patted him in the shoulder, "at sales. I've seen you."

"I had at least a dozen customers over the weekend reject every suggestion I made. Not even being Employee of the Month helped."

"You can't get down on yourself. You'll find a way." Carla was doing her level best to keep Mick's spirits up.

"Not if I can't sell a dumb sweater."

"I know what the problem is."

"What?"

Carla flicked the collar of Mick's shirt. "Slacks? Dress Shirt? there are roughly a trillion people who look just like this. You don't look like you know much about fashion."

"I thought I looked okay," Mick responded, meekly.

"You look *okay*. But you need to look like you really know fashion and you can give advice on the subject."

"Whoa. You don't want to bleach my hair more, do you?"

Carla giggled. "Silly! No!" What you need to do is jump on the fashion train."

"Does it matter that I don't know crap about style?"

"But I do," Carla said with a smile. "After I'm done, you and me are going to get you a fashion education."

Mick shrugged. "I don't wanna put you out or anything."

"I'm not put out," Carla said. "This will be fun."



Mick finished his shift the next day absolutely dizzy. He had been so busy he had no idea it was even time to clock out until Penny dragged him off the floor.

Today was different. When a customer asked his opinion on what looked best on them, they took his suggestion. Not only did they take his suggestions, they asked for it.

"What goes with these pants?" One man asked about his khakis.

Truthfully, nothing, but Mick was ready. "If I could make a suggestion, this shirt is all the rage this season!" He picked out a particularly awful shirt that wasn't selling very well.

"I like it!" The man replied. "I'll take one in every color!"

All day his interactions with guests were like this. People bought whatever he offered.

"Welcome to the club, Mick," Penny said when Mick got back to the office.

"Club?" Mick asked, as he checked his hair in a mirror.

"The 100,000 dollar club," she explained. "Your sales for the month just passed 100,000 dollars for the month."

"Whoa. Seriously?" Even Mick was impressed by that. He had thought his numbers were up, but over 100K? That was big. "I owe it all to the little people," he said, flamboyantly.



That was a good way to describe his new look. Flamboyant. Carla had set Mick up with a new wardrobe full of color and showy designs. Today, he was wearing a lavender shirt with floppy ruffled sleeves.

“I think it looks gay,” Mick told Carla when she picked it out for him.

“That’s the idea,” Carla explained. “It’s psychological. People just think gay men know a lot about fashion. If they make the assumption you’re, you know a little bit of a fairy, they’ll also assume you’re an expert in style.”

“Are you sure? This seems kinda... I don’t know... Retarded.”

“I was right about the hair, wasn’t I?”

So Mick went through with it. He even played it up a little with some exaggerated swishy gestures and little lispings here and there. It worked like a charm.

“Well, when a sales associate reaches 100,000, I have a little bit of a ritual,” Penny explained. She gave Mick a small jewelry box. “I hope you don’t take this the wrong way, but every other member of the 100,000 dollar club has been female.”

Mick popped the case open to find two earrings inside. They were dangling rhinestones.

He immediately recognized them. “Sharon wears a pair just like these,” he said.

“She’s the only other current member of the club,” Penny said. “A few years ago, the jewelry store owed us for some uniforms they got from us and they paid us off in jewelry. So we’ve used them as rewards for the 100K club.”

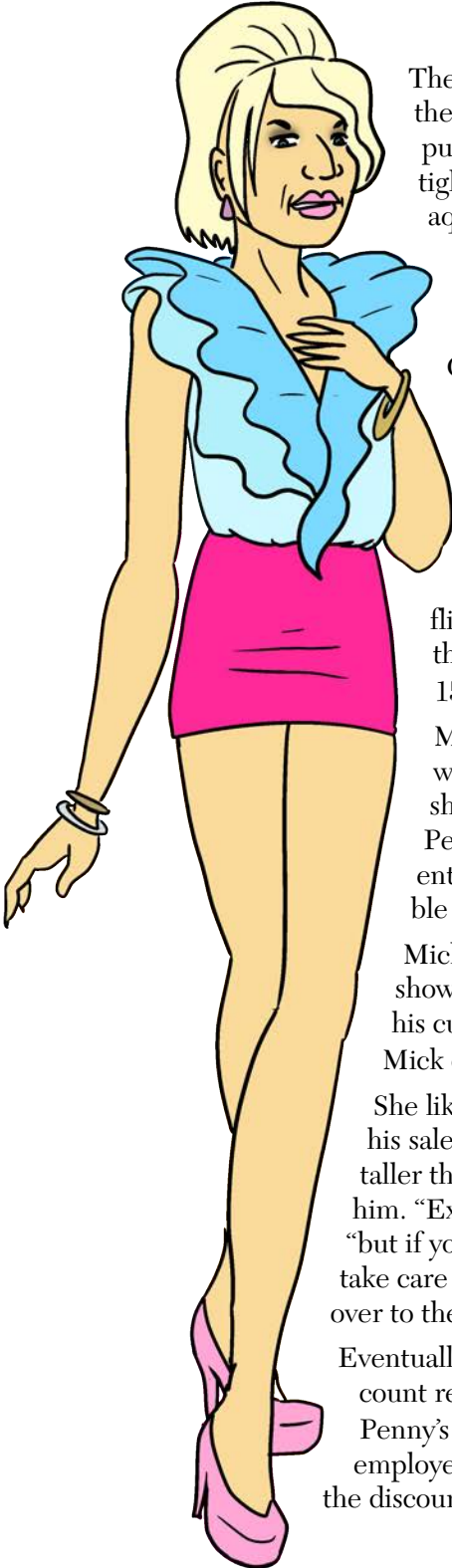
Mick held them up to his ears. “I think that maybe I’ll skip wearing these. No offense.”

Penny laughed. “I perfectly understand. But congratulations anyway.”

No sooner had he exited the office than Mick crossed paths with Sharon, who quickly spotted the earrings in his hands. She froze in place and made the most disgusted face.

She then proceeded to the restroom. “Fuck!” She yelled when the door shut.





The next weekend, Sharon was strutting around the sales floor with a new confidence. She had purchased a pair of six inch pink platform heels, a tight micro mini magenta skirt and an extravagant aqua blue top full of ruffles and sequins. Just seeing her walk was filled with as much pagantry as a Chinese New Years Day parade.

She'd made another visit to Carla at Modern Clips and had ratcheted up the glamour once again. She had added sparkles to her smoky black eye shadow and frizzed out her hair even further, giving her a look more like a club hopper than a sales person.

That wasn't her only trick, either. Not only were shoppers drawn to her appearance like flies to rotting food, but she was offering something Mick couldn't – a "special discount" of 15%.

Mick had to spend the entire day to figure out what she was doing, and more importantly, how she was doing it. Offering a discount without Penny's approval was against the rules, and even entering a discount into the register was impossible without Penny's private override code.

Mick was losing sales like crazy. Sharon made a show of coming over to his sales area and poaching his customers, giving them the 15% discount that Mick could not.

She liked walking right up to Mick and interrupting his sales pitch. With the extra-high heels on, she was taller than Mick, and looked right down her nose at him. "Excuse me," she would say to Mick's customers, "but if you'd like an extra 15% off that purchase, I can take care of that for you." She'd then lead them back over to the register.

Eventually, Mick figured out that she was using the discount reserved for family members. That didn't need Penny's code. All Penny had to do was punch in her employee ID, and the discount was applied. In theory, the discount wasn't supposed to be used for everyone, but

there weren't any checks on abusing it, as far as Mick knew.

Once he understood what she was doing, he headed straight for Penny's office. "I knew it," Sharon said, getting in Mick's way. "Running to mommy when you get a bloody nose."

"You're not playing fair," Mick replied with a snarl.

"Boo hoo," Sharon teased. "You want to be a top seller in this store? Then you have to play tough. You're not in my league and you never were."

Through the rage and the fury that was flooding his body with impulsive anger, Mick had to admit the bitch had a point. If he went to Penny now, the best he could hope for was a little scolding against using the discount code. There was no way Penny was going to fire Sharon.

Mick took a deep breath through his nostrils and headed back to his station. It was probably cliché, but she had just made this personal. For the next hour, all Mick could think about was ways to get back at Sharon. He wanted justice. No, more accurately, he wanted vengeance. Messy, decisive, screaming vengeance.



"What are you reading?" Carla asked her favorite client.

"The Blaine's Apparel Exchange sales guide," Mick replied.

"Sounds fascinating."

"I gotta know this stuff back and forth if I'm gonna get a leg up on that bitch," Mick said. As he waited for Carla to finish up with his hair, he was reading through the section on personal appearance.

'Your skin should be clear of blemishes,' it read. 'A clean face is a healthy face and a healthy face is a winning face.'

Mick looked at himself in the mirror. He was susceptible to the occasional break out of zits – after all, he was still 18. His skin was light in color, or as Carla called it, "fair," and he often had reddish patches on his nose and chin.

"Is there anything you can do about my skin?" Mick asked.

"Not a lot," Carla said. "Nothing, really."

"You're not a very good stylist," Mick said, needling her.

Carla took a break for a moment to grab a small box off a counter and drop it in Mick's lap. "There you go."

"What's this?" Mick flipped opened the top of the box. It had the words "Distinct Look" on the underside of the lid.

"Makeup for men."

Mick's instinct was to recoil like someone had dropped a cobra in his lap. The very idea that such a thing existed was repugnant to the core of his being. But he kept his calm.

"If you want to see a dermatologist, you can do that. All I have is the makeup kit. It's got bronzer, glare reducer, eye enhancer and eyelash glaze. Or in other words, powder, foundation, eyeliner and mascara."

Mick started to hand it back. "I don't..."

"Please take it," Carla said, sincerely. "It's a free sample from the company, and I'm never going to sell one, so it's just cluttering up the place."

"Uh... Okay," Mick said, putting it away. He had a small sack of stuff he had been carrying around with him, and as he put the box in it, he saw the 100,000 club earrings were inside.

"Do you do piercings?" He asked Carla.



Sharon limped into Modern Clips with a nasty disposition, her most common mood. The six inch heels were obviously killing her feet, and they clacked like hooves on cobblestones as she dumped her bag on the floor. She flopped into the chair in a flurry of blonde curls and tacky clothes.

"You'll never believe what that loser did today!" Sharon said, assuming that Carla could remember their conversations from previous visits – or, indeed, cared.

"Um, what?" Carla replied.

"Earrings. He wore earrings!" Sharon made an exasperated grunt. "He thinks this whole gay act is going to get him bigger sales. What a freak."

Carla was doing her best to keep from smiling and laughing, biting her lip to keep her mouth shut.

"Thinks he can beat me... I'll show him..." Sharon wasn't even talking to Carla anymore. She was just talking to herself. "Doesn't know shit about selling... Can't be Employee of the Month..."

"So, what do you want to do today?" Carla asked.

"I don't know..." Sharon said, in frustration. "This was working for a little while..."

She was still doing herself up like a Vegas showgirl, going through tube after tube of eyeshadow and glitter to achieve her new look. Her hair had lost a bit of its' life though, and was limp.

"I was thinking, you know, going even more extreme," Carla suggested.