

M.A.'s Submission

Luke.evilmonkeycult.com's GMail invitation winner on 6-23-04

Natural Born Worker

The summer before I packed my life up into a few cardboard boxes and embarked on the four-year epic adventure to college, I got a job running a fireworks stand through a family friend. The hour-long drive to and from home across the murky Louisiana swamps every day didn't thrill me, but it was the best job offer I had at the time. My only other option was cleaning up the summertime-sizzling parking lot at the local Wal-Mart Supercenter for slave wages. The choice between sitting surrounded by explosives in the shade of a huge tent and scraping God-knows-what off of bubbling-hot asphalt seemed a fairly simple one. But, as my eternally-wise father used to say, "Never let an opportunity to push grocery carts and pick up three day old, sun-scorched trash go by unexplored." So I begrudgingly drove to the interview, finding myself actually obeying speed limits in my own unconscious attempt to delay becoming a worker ant for the well-oiled machine that is corporate America. I arrived to the usual hustle and bustle that encompasses the megalithic grocery store at around 11:00 AM on Tuesdays. In the south, you see, Wal-Mart is *the place* to be. If you call a friend's house and are greeted by the familiar drone of an answering machine whose message was made years ago in a combination of 8-bit Nintendo music and the family dog's howling, all you need to do is trek to the nearest Wal-Mart Supercenter. Once there, according to certain scientific studies, you have no less than an eighty percent chance of finding your friend among the countless aisles of low-priced goodness.

Trudging across the parking lot beneath the blazing sun, I surveyed the vast plain of tar, stretching out before my eyes to the holy place of fresh produce and electronic joy. Buggies left behind carelessly by their temporary owners sat gathered in herds, awaiting a fearless, stone-faced buggy-boy to chorale them back to the store. But alas, all the sadly grazing shopping carts had to save them was a lone, sweat-drenched, pudgy-faced 17-year-old who still got his kicks getting high off of scratch-and-sniff stickers and Elmer's glue. Shaking my head in sympathy for the downtrodden buggies, I watched the automatic doors open seductively in front of me, beckoning me into the chaotic maw of merchandise.

Upon entering, I was promptly assailed by an eighty-year-old retiree in a blue vest, pushing a newly-recycled shopping cart into my path. Caught off-guard by her Cheshire-esque smile, valued by corporate America at a mere \$5.25 an hour, I held up my hands defensively, avoiding direct eye contact and tersely shaking my head. Her crescent-moon grin almost waned downward for a moment before, upon seeing another customer arriving in my wake, she turned her all-too-cheerful buggy-assault fully upon him.

As soon as I slipped through the swinging doors and into the New Employee Orientation Room, I began to further question the integrity of my situation. Straight from The Matrix, I found myself surrounded by large, whitewashed walls lined with cold, calculating computer consoles. Each glowing terminal was dutifully accompanied by a

seemingly unaware, head-phoned individual basking mindlessly in the soft emanations of Customer Service ideals and Wal-Mart history lessons. The first and only term that came to my mind was “brainwashed.” I could just picture myself coming home after a few days of this sort of assimilation:

“So,” my father would say, “how was work today?”

“Samuel Walton built up the first Wal-Mart in Bentonville, Arkansas on May 9, 1950,” I would reply dreamily, as if discussing some long lost lover. “That’s... great,” I could hear the disgusted, sarcastic tone of my mother saying. “But do you have to wear your work uniform to the dinner table?”

“As a representative of Wal-Mart, I must always be ready to serve, Mother.”

My fear of becoming a mindless drone in Wal-Mart’s arsenal was further solidified during the interview process. The interviewer turned out to be a masculine, fifty-and-some-odd-year-old woman whose nametag gleefully declared, “Hi, my name is Mallory.” Recently released from an all-woman’s prison in upstate Louisiana, Mallory Knox was now a part of Wal-Mart’s renowned Convict-Reform program and regarded the corporate giant as her own personal savior, Jesus Christ.

“There are just so many opportunities here,” she cooed, her tar-stained teeth dimmed an even dirtier shade of green by the mellow lighting.

That lighting in conjunction with the soft, rhythmic tone that Mallory’s voice created became hypnotic. Fighting it with every ounce of power my mind had, I felt myself slowly being overpowered and sucked into the mindless void created by her every word. Terms and phrases such as “torturous work hours and conditions” and “no room for advancement” seemed to pass straight through one ear, past my glazed eyes, and right out the other side, leaving me completely unaffected. I know now that this stupefying of interviewees is standard practice and makes it extremely easy to hire them onto low-paying, thankless jobs. But at the time it sure as hell did a number on me. By the time she was finished with her entrancing spiel, I was practically begging to sign on a dotted line, any dotted line. I was completely prepared to sell my eternal soul, if need be, to Wal-Mart for minimum wage with no benefits or sick-leave. Mallory smiled widely and I swear I heard her hiss softly through her teeth, “Another one bites the dust.” At this juncture, she informed me that I had to pass a drug test before I would be allowed to be a part of what she referred to as, “the family.”

“It’s no big deal,” she comforted when she saw the disappointed look on my face. “Tomorrow morning, just go over to the drug-testing unit at around eight o’clock, get tested, and we’ll have you all enslaved... err... signed up by noon.”

I nodded so emphatically I still suffer from recurring whiplash to this day. Mallory put together the forms and handed them to me carefully, like they were some all-important, world-affecting documents. I received them as such, tucking them under one arm and covering them with my free hand. The fate of the consumer-driven world was safe with me.

“Now, remember, hon,” she said in her thick southern drawl, “you only have twenty four hours to be tested. After that time, Wal-Mart cannot hire you for an entire year.”

I smiled again and shook her hand vigorously, fighting the urge to hug her as if she was a surrogate mother who I’d never see again. As I walked gleefully out to the parking lot, protecting the drug forms from the light drizzle, the trance slowly began to

wear off. A terrible, overwhelming fear slowly overtook my mind. What had I just done? Was I insane? If I went through with the drug test, I would end up being de-programmed, my mind reconstructed into yet another zombie in the Wal-Mart hordes. I stood next to my car trembling with indecision. The effects of the mental serum named Mallory, while fading, still had a good grip on my subconscious. Looking down at the papers in my hand, my mind battled against itself over what to do. Just then I saw the zit-faced, sweat-soaked buggy cowboy, burdened with an obedient line of close to fifty grocery carts, trudging across the pavement. He looked up at me, his face a mixture of sweat and raindrops. His eyes met mine and I saw the broken soul inside, begging for freedom.

“That will be you,” my mind whispered forebodingly.

In a sudden, defiant burst of energy I threw the papers onto the wet, puddle-ridden ground and took a slight stumble backwards. Quivering a little, I fought the urge to rush over and save the documents. I watched half-horrified, half-relieved as murky water spread and seeped its way through the pages, causing the ink to run in splotchy lines. At that point, realizing that a run-down Chevy, helmed by Mr. and Mrs. Podunk and packed to maximum capacity by their five kids, was waiting for my parking spot, I sadly got into my car, threw it into gear and drove home a jobless, but free man, exorcised of the Wally World demons.

That night, when I explained the whole thing to my father, he sat very quietly, nodding his head now and then in deep, contemplative thought. His wise eyes fixated on mine, his keen ears taking in every word and processing it to the fullest extent. When I finally finished my tale of deception and personal redemption, he leaned back in his chair, projecting an aura full of the infinite wisdom that only a father of three children and countless years can possess. A look of concern crossed over his face and he leaned forward slightly, saying something I will carry with me for the rest of my life:

“So... We don't get a discount at Wal-Mart?”