

JUSTINE BROWN

## The Miser

I USED TO WORK as a bank teller. It was the most boring job I ever had and I don't think I'm being extreme when I say that I hated it. Probably the worst part was my boss, Betty. I wouldn't have liked her even if she hadn't been the overseer of my working life. She had big, blonde hair, long red fingernails and a painted mask for a face but she didn't stop at visual assault. The whole bank was permeated with the smell of Betty's cloying perfume. She could spend hours talking about her state-of-the-art kitchen and her new living-room suite whether her audience was obviously bored or not. On her desk she had a framed picture of her husband and two sons; occasionally she would mention them, but they always came across sounding like pet dogs.

Betty was in charge of the tellers and very proud of her position. After I had been working there for awhile, and was deemed eligible to hear all the office gossip, I was told the story of her promotion. She and a male co-worker in the mortgage department were both in the running for the job, but it sounded like he never stood a chance. It was rumoured that Betty was the chief orchestrating force behind a nasty smear campaign. She was the only person in the office that still thought of herself as sweet and generous. The other tellers would tell stories of her zealous ambition with a hint of awed respect in their voices. It never ceased to amaze me how far people were willing to go to protect their marginal slice of power in that little bank branch.

It wasn't the easiest thing in the world to learn how to be a bank teller, mainly because Betty wasn't very good at her job. I

was a student, at the time, in university. I chose banking as a part-time job for the money. It paid a lot more than working in retail, and I thought it would be easy to learn—just a matter of giving and taking money. It turned out to be a bit more complicated than that. Betty's idea of training was to hand me a manual and tell me to read it.

I struggled along and learned as I went. I did make a lot of stupid mistakes, but a lot of Betty's impatient wrath was unnecessary. I started serving customers almost right away, which was nerve-racking since I didn't really know what I was doing. I thought my stumbling ineptitude was the cause for the customers' irritation, but even after I achieved perfect competence they continued to be a nasty bunch.

I think it's the line that does it. People hate to stand in line. By the time they get to the front they're full of bottled up frustration. They can't take it out on their fellow customers, except by glaring stonily at the backs of their heads, so they vent it all on the teller. It's a strange relationship between teller and customer. Usually you'd have to be quite intimate with somebody to know exactly how much money they not only earn, but have saved. The teller is a stranger who knows all these personal details. Maybe people wouldn't choose to be so rude if the teller was forced to disclose their own bank balance to each customer.

My early relationship with the customers wasn't helped by Betty's need to control. She hated to be bothered with procedural questions but insisted on initialing any transaction over three hundred dollars. Most transactions were over three hundred dollars, so I spent half my days standing politely beside her desk waiting for her attention. She would painstakingly finish whatever she was doing, even if it was a doodle on her blotter, before she would deign to notice me. Then she would take the cheque or transaction slip and study it intently before approving it. It was never clear to me exactly what she was scrutinizing it for, nor did she ever refuse to initial. Most customers would interpret the whole charade as an attack on their integrity; they'd get shifty-eyed and even more definitively unpleasant.

All of the bank tellers, standing behind their wickets, were women. Betty was the only female in the whole branch who merited a desk and a chair. I just knew that a lot of the frenetic businessmen who came rushing in to do their banking in a flurry of obsession

with their own self-importance saw this as the natural order of things. They would imperiously fling their bundle of disorganized cheques and cash at me and issue commands about what they wanted done with it while addressing me as sweetie or honey. I spent a lot of time speaking through gritted teeth. Betty had a few favourites out of that crowd. When they would come in she would hover behind me and flirt coyly.

It was during my first week that I was introduced to a customer called Mr. Parsims. I encountered first his smell, which preceded him by several feet, and didn't practice subtle wafting. It invaded the air surrounding him and hit bystanders with enough impact to bring tears to their eyes. It was a loyal companion, his smell, constantly heralding his presence, withholding none of its potency to allow for desensitization. Such an odour thrived in all the venues that Mr. Parsims provided. In his layer upon layer of dirt-stiffened clothing, it flourished. It even bloomed among his tufts of wild hair and their accompanying relics of bygone meals. Its main seat of power was in his hands. They were blackened down to the creases in his palms with indelible grime and crowned by feral yellow fingernails.

Once my vision cleared I tried to establish eye-contact, desperate to look no longer on those horrible hands. His eyes were intense and smouldering with no attention to spare for me. They were entranced by an assortment of bank books, each of which he was removing from its separate, designated pocket. He retrieved them one by one deliberately with no hint of carelessness in his motions. They were all neatly encased in their plastic covers. He lined them up lovingly along the counter, caressing each one before allowing it out of his grasp.

He still hadn't spoken and neither had I. I was mesmerized by his ritual, and small talk would have sounded lurid. Instead I waited and watched as he went once more to another pocket. He pulled out a government envelope and removed the cheque—adorning what had once been the pristine soft yellow surface with dirty fingerprints. It was already covered with quite a few. He must have pulled it out and examined it many times already.

“Would you like that cashed, sir?” I asked brightly.

“Cashed?” he said, sounding appalled. “I want it deposited in my Fund Saver account.” His voice was gruff and rusty. It didn't sound as though he used it very often. Despite the lack of practice

he was clear-spoken and very comfortable with the banking terminology.

All of the bank books were the same blue and the same size and shape. I reached for one nearest me, hoping it was the Fund Saver. I didn't want to have to touch any of his things more than was strictly necessary. Just as my hand hovered over the book indecisively, his shot out at lightning speed and closed over mine in a punitive grip. His eyes flashed out at me in anger and it took a lot of self-control not to give a little scream. "Not that one," he barked in distress. Still gripping my hand he guided it to the one in the middle.

I picked it up feeling very flustered. I carefully removed the plastic cover under his watchful eye and opened the book. It released a sharp wave of his pungent odour and I tried not to breathe through my nose. Folded inside the front cover was a neatly filled out deposit slip. I was impressed. Not a lot of customers go to that much effort. Certainly none of those patronizing businessmen, to whom I was supposed to pander, would have bothered with the chore.

I entered the deposit into the computer and watched to make sure it had gone through. The new balance came up on the screen and I could hardly believe my eyes. He had hundreds of thousands of dollars in that account. I peeked at him but he wasn't paying any attention to me. He was gazing proudly down on his other bank books. I wondered how much money he had tucked away in them.

Following the procedure for updating the bank book, I flipped to the last entry. It was full and he needed a new one. I felt quite proud of myself since I knew how to do this and didn't have to go running to Betty to ask. I filled out the front of the book and updated it in the printer. The brightness of the pages was quite a contrast to the old smudged book. I handed it to Mr. Parsims, expecting him to look pleased. There's something satisfying about filling up a whole book and getting a new one. Instead he looked panicked and kept his eyes glued to the full book still sitting on my side of the counter.

"Give it to me," he demanded through a frog in his throat. He looked at me with such suspicion that I think he thought that I was going to try and kidnap it. He was only pacified when he had grabbed it out of my hand and tucked it safely back in its designated

pocket. I tentatively updated his other bank books, at his request, and we didn't say anything more to each other on that visit.

After he left Betty sidled up to me. "So what did you think of Mr. Parsims?" she asked. Her conspiratorial tone grated on my nerves.

"He's very rich," I said.

Betty wrinkled up her nose at the lingering smell. "He's a miser. You know, someone who hoards money just for the sake of it," Betty explained with condescension. She always assumed that the rest of the world was far below her own imagined pinnacle of intelligence. "I bet he spends all his spare time gloating over those bank books. He's disgusting." She obviously despised him. Dropping the subject of Mr. Parsims she went off into rhapsodies about a new, custom-made lamp she had bought for her famous living-room. She managed to drop the artist's name into the conversation three times, but it didn't mean anything to me as I had never heard of her.

I saw him on the street a few weeks later. He was sitting in the shade on a park bench. I recognized him immediately from a long distance away. There was something about the way that he held his head and shoulders so proudly erect that set him apart from other street people. Up until that point I had been feeling sorry for him. I had assumed that he was ashamed and lonely, but he didn't look either of those sitting there so contentedly.

As I got closer I could see that he was smiling. He had one of his bank books open in his hand and occasionally he would whisper to it. I had been planning to give a cheery hello but I changed my mind. I would have been an unwelcome intrusion.

Mr. Parsims was a very regular customer. He came in three or four times a week. Sometimes he would just have his books updated but he usually had some sort of deposit even if it was just loose change. He had an intimate system for deciding what money went into which account. I started to think of the books as his family. There was his wife, who generally got the government cheques, and his children who got the smaller change. I liked to imagine that he was giving them their allowance.

He always set his family out on the counter in the same order so that I quickly learned which was which. It was a simple enough thing to do and Mr. Parsims appreciated it. He always came to me and not to the other tellers. Of course I never told him my fantasy about his paper family. We rarely spoke at all. Betty

never got tired of teasing me. She insisted that the old man was in love with me. I knew that his loyalty wasn't based on any sort of secret affection. He simply trusted me, but I didn't even bother trying to explain that to Betty.

The day I gave my notice is memorable for two occurrences, both of them disasters. The first involved Betty and was my fault. After almost a year Betty trusted me enough to permit me to process transactions of up to eight hundred dollars without her initial. I was still spending a lot of time lining up at her desk begging her permission. I was engaged in this tired old routine when I accidentally knocked over her full cup of coffee. It was one of those terrible moments where hand-eye coordination is lost. I tried to grab at the cup as it tipped over but ended up sending it reeling across the desk where it collided with Betty's family photo. It smashed the frame and the coffee drenched the photograph.

To hear Betty's reaction you would have thought that I had murdered her family. The walls of the building trembled with her rage. Her ranting and raving drew the manager from his office and Betty had to effect an appearance of calming down in his presence. He pointed out that she could have another copy of the photograph made from the negative. I thought it was a very logical point, but I could tell that Betty was only pretending to be pacified. She didn't speak to me for the rest of the day, even to tease me, in her malicious style, after Mr. Parsims had been and gone.

The bank closed as usual and everyone began their end-of-day paperwork. It was a subdued environment with nobody talking much. Everyone just wanted to get finished and go home and away from the Betty-induced oppressive atmosphere. It was alarming to suddenly hear someone start pounding on the locked doors and calling desperately to be let inside. We could all see that it was Mr. Parsims and that he was enormously upset. It couldn't be ignored and one of the men finally let him enter. He came straight to my wicket. I had never seen him look so wild or so tragic. He had tears streaming down his face and his eyes burned into me.

"Did I leave them here?" he shouted.

"No." I shook my head. I knew that he could only be referring to his bank books.

Betty had hustled over to my side. "What is the problem Mr. Parsims?" she asked with exaggerated patience.

Mr. Parsims could only look at her blankly, lacking the words to explain his loss. "He's lost his bank books." I was barely able to speak myself in the face of such distress.

"That's no problem Mr. Parsims. We'll get you some new books," she said coldly. She didn't even bother to put on the voice she customarily used to placate upset customers.

I hated to be the voice of doom but I knew that Betty didn't understand what he was asking or what she was promising. "I'm sorry Mr. Parsims, but we can't reprint the old books. It's not possible."

With that one sentence I destroyed all the trust that had been built up between us. He swiftly shifted his allegiance from me and protested, "But she said ...."

"Of course we can't do that," Betty interrupted in a brisk tone. "We can give you fresh new books, tomorrow, when the bank is open again." She sounded like she was trying to appease a toddler. "You don't even need your book to access your account."

"I can't have them back?" he asked me, crying again.

"Maybe you'll find them, Mr. Parsims," I suggested inadequately. I'd never felt so helpless. He wandered out of the bank, his shoulders slumped and his head hanging low in dejection. Even his faithful smell seemed to have lost some of its pungency. I lost sight of him as he blended into the crowd outside.

"What a melodramatic old wastrel," observed Betty sanctimoniously.