

The second hand ticked and tocked as the clock grew ever so closer to closing time. There were only twenty-three minutes and fifty-four seconds to go. Fifty-three. Fifty-two. Fifty-one. She couldn't help but watch the slow creep of the second hand. It had been the worst day of her life.

Usually she loved working in the bookshop. Hometown Books was quite literally her home away from home. All of her friends either worked there or stopped in on a daily basis. It was a brightly lit, friendly atmosphere. The customers, though radically different, were usually polite and happy. They were sometimes even enthusiastic to have conversations with her over their favorite authors and books. There were vehement disagreements at times, raised voices weren't always out of the question, but in general everyone was there because they wanted to be there. It was a safe place for them to congregate. But something had changed recently.

The last couple of days had seen clouded faces. Kids ran through the shop screaming and breaking things, often times purposely getting in her way. She would try to appeal to their parents only to find that their parents had left. Many times customers broke out into fights, over trivial things like the best couch or the bathroom pass. And yesterday her boss announced that this would be his last day. Barry had been the manager for what felt like forever. He had a calming voice that worked especially well on arrant children and troubled teens. He had managed the shop smoothly, pulling it out of the downward spiral it had been in ever since Amazon had digitalized books. But now he was leaving.

Twenty-two minutes and forty-five seconds. Forty-four. Forty-three. Forty-two. Today had been even worse. Not only had every other customer been yelling and screaming at anything that moved, or else covering their heads and humming really loud, but early in the day two customers came in who caused more trouble than all the rest combined.

The mother-son duo had been waiting at the doors before she even unlocked them. At first both had seemed normal, entering into the stacks and browsing as they were wont. The mother went straight for the political section: *"Dynasty Building 101"* and *"How to Win Friends & Influence People."* The boy headed for the

picture books: *"Build a Bigger Wall!"* and *"Do I Look Like a Pumpkin?"*

The books entertained them for a while and she thought nothing more of them. But as the morning passed and other customers came in and out of the shop a clamor slowly began to rise from the children's section. The little boy was often at odds with the other children who came in. He made fun of the waxen faced boy and the gawky teen whose family had been regulars there for years. A robot obsessed kid tried to stand up to him, but the little boy was too smart of a bully. He had recruited other children to do his dirty work and a pudgy boy who liked bridges beat up the robo-fanatic.

She was appalled at this behavior but when she sought out the mother, to right her child's wrongs, the mother was in the process of ripping the cane away from an elderly gentleman. It seemed menace ran in the family. While the little boy continued his bullying ways, the mother was a little more subtle in her under-handed ways. She cozied up to Barry, sweet talking him and offering to help in his move. While Barry was distracted with packing his things she would peek at the shop's books, maybe make little changes here or there. A couple of times she bought books and then would return them, some how losing her receipts in the minutes between changing her mind, demanding refunds despite this breaking store policy.

But now it was the end of the day. Only twelve minutes to go. And the mother and son were standing at the counter, each one demanding her attention. The mother had a large stack of books: *"How to Pay for College," "Diversify Your Portfolio," "The History of the Cold War,"* and so many more. "I'm not getting any younger," her voice was a little shrill with her proclamation.

The little boy meanwhile was yelling at the top of his lungs, "PAY ATTENTION TO ME." Clutched in his tiny hands was the first book he saw when he walked in, *"Build a Bigger Wall!"* He was pounding on the floor and jumping up and down. "I hate you, I hate you, I hate you," he seemed to scream at every person he could see. "Why won't you love me?"

This last cry his mother just ignored. "Please, just these books. Don't pay him much mind, he'll calm down when this day is over. I just want to go home and

get some sleep.”

“I’m with her,” she thought as she rung up each book. “It’s been a very long day.”