

fealty

by M. F. Sullivan

just before my break,
he came on the line,
old and slow with computers now
but wanting a discount
he'd been told he qualified for.

thirty years he worked at the company, he said.

well, let's get you on the site,
make sure you qualify for a discount.

a half hour i work with him
an hour
another half hour
and the screen telling him he should get it free
won't take him any further.

nobody can tell us why
or wants to help him but me,
the sucker who bought his pleas
that he not be transferred

because i hate to treat people shitty
even when they're taking money from my pocket

under the impression
that it will come back to me in karma.

i left him with a tech who shared his screen
and when i called him back
after an hour and a half late break
and a half hour late lunch

the tech had kicked him off the line
with a solution that didn't work
but he was delighted to hear my voice

and this time as we tried everything
to find nothing worked
he asked me about the weather in tucson.

humid, i said, almost monsoon season.
i went to school in virginia, though,
and i don't envy your winters.

i told him how the power would go out in the commissary
and you'd trudge through two feet of snow
to discover there was no food that morning.

he laughed, even harder when i told him
how on fourth of july,
art and i had a great time
and not so much for him on the fifth
but i was fine because my liver's stronger.

he told me about his family picnic,
arlington, he said,
with a wild fireworks show,

and from department to department
we spoke with person after person
who didn't know and didn't care
why he couldn't get his discount

until the man who cared the least
asked us in charcoal monotone
if mister jay had accepted a buy-out.

he had, he said.

the young man, who delivered this news
to caller after caller,
responded that this made him ineligible
so the website might tell him he qualified,
but it wouldn't work to take him anywhere.

it was like a balloon deflated,
and another hour and a half later
long after i'd dropped the bored kid in discounts,
i'd convinced mister jay it was more sensible
to move down in package
than to keep fighting

for a company into which he'd poured
thirty years of work
to tip their hat
now that he was trying to enjoy himself a little
before the box ate him up.

a luxury, television,
but a man who's labored thirty years
should get a little luxury
in any sensible world
full of people who know what it's like to work every day

whether it's construction work installing windows
surrounded by bottles of pee
and an occasional dearth of conversation
at the hands of tool-thieving pushers;

or forty years spent standing behind the counter of a convenience
store

a pillar to the community, unappreciated,
one hand barely working because of a blood clot,
but malt shakes still perfectly scooped;

or taking verbal abuse and the terror of instability
brought on by the fear that some day,
a crotchety old fuck in pennsylvania
will break the tedium with a trip to the gutter
because he demanded your job
the way the worst customers do of all the reps
who aren't you
because it's never you
until you're the one called to the meeting.

i'm sorry, i said to bookend thick silences
between the taps of calculator buttons,
knowing that's the way capitalism works
and being unable to argue
with the company i represent
in exchange for a roof over my head.

sorry.

i'm exhausted, he said before making a decision.

i understand, sir, i told him as we hit a total
of three hours on the phone together.

is there anything else i help you with,
i asked, dumb as a goldfish,
and he said, no, i guess not,

and we hung up.

