

The Bert Principle

My branch manager, Bert, is standing next to our five-feet-high cardboard owl mascot near the front entrance. She's scrutinizing our library like a real owl, or maybe an eagle, whichever one has the best eyesight and neck rotation. So I do what any mature employee—and by mature, I mean old lady—would do. I crouch down in my chair until I'm no longer visible behind the reference desk. Because I'm *this close* to being fired. I figure if Bert doesn't see me, she will get sidetracked by one of her million other duties. Faulty logic I suppose, because if she wants to fire me, she knows where I am.

Bert walks into the circulation manager's office, and I sigh in relief. In an unfortunate coincidence—or what Ralph calls the perfect storm of age-discrimination—my husband and I both lost our jobs. We need the money I'm making. We're both just short of sixty-five so we also need the health insurance.

Being offered this job six months ago was a miracle. I'm sure I didn't get it by working my entire adult life as an envelope machine adjuster. My Masters in Library Science might have helped, bolded at the top of my resume. The fact that I graduated 40 years ago was not included.

While I'm down here hiding, I grab a cookie from the gallon freezer bag of goodies I've brought to munch on. I doubt I'm supposed to be eating Oreos while working, but I haven't had time to read the policies. I'm too busy screwing up the day-to-day stuff.

Reference: How could I have known that nobody was going to ask me where last week's local newspaper was? How could I have known that nobody was going to ask me what they should read next if they loved Anne Tyler novels? How could I have known

(but maybe I should've?) that 99.9% of the time patrons were going to want assistance with the public computers?

Here is what I knew about computers six months ago: How to wiggle the mouse around to locate the cursor. (I did not know it was called a cursor.)

I've watched Bert's reaction to my lack of knowledge morph from disbelief to aghast, bypassing exasperation altogether. Instead of improving, I've started screwing up the easy stuff.

I forget my passwords, one at a time, until I've forgotten them all.

Somebody gives me \$5 for a \$4.35 charge. I hand them three quarters and a nickel.

I lock the key to the conference room in the meeting room.

My shift ends at 4:00. I forget to leave.

I have confided my screw-ups (the ones I remember) to my best friend, Aggie.

"It doesn't sound like Alzheimer's, Chrissy," she says. When you're over sixty, Alzheimer's is the first thing you think of when you start screwing up tasks involving keys and money. "It sounds like stress."

At first I'm reassured. But then I remember that I chose this woman as a friend because she wasn't one to tell me to lay off the Pringles or that tube tops weren't designed for my body type. If she thinks I'm loony, she's going to keep it to herself.

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There is a sliver of hope for me. Her name is Ellie. Our shifts overlap an hour (more when I forget to leave), and she has taken me under her wing. She's young. Twenty-six tops. She's smart. I've never seen a patron stump her with their questions, and

I think there are a few who ask her things just for that reason. She's beautiful. I believe she'd be the most beautiful girl in the world if her hair wasn't blue.

When no one needs assistance, Ellie has been teaching me stuff. Ellie has four-year-old and two-year-old daughters, and I'm not sure if she's using the level of patience she would use with her two- or her four-year-old. I don't care, because thanks to Ellie I have learned how to save files in folders, how to print out downloads, how to edit PDFs, and how to use the snipping tool. She's taught me Windows and browsers, task bars and tool bars, headers and footers, landscape and portrait. I know about CTRLs, JPEGs, GIFs, USBs, and HDMIIs.

You might be impressed with these phrases and acronyms if you're over sixty, but now kids are born knowing this stuff. In other words, I haven't learned enough to be of much use to our patrons.

Ellie brings me presents: Magazines full of sudoku, crosswords, logic puzzles.

At change of shift yesterday, she pulled up word-picture riddles on the computer. We laughed together as we whispered the solutions—"scatterbrain," "woman overboard," "lost in space." Sometimes I got it first, but Ellie was probably letting me build my confidence.

I know what this sweet girl is up to. She is trying to save me from Alzheimer's with brain games and math puzzles.

And what I love about Ellie is that she's so damn smart, yet she thinks people can be saved from Alzheimer's with brain games and math puzzles.

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Bert has begun herding me into her office every Thursday afternoon to address my shortcomings.

Last Thursday, when Bert summoned me, she said, “Mrytle Oldenberg told me you weren’t able to help her apply for a passport.”

What a tattletale! You’d think us golden girls would stick together. Mrytle wasn’t lying though. Before we lost our jobs, Ralph and I vacationed in Erie Pennsylvania instead of Toronto because neither one of us could figure out the passport website.

“After Mrytle left,” I told Bert, “I watched a YouTube. If Myrtle came in now and asked me to help her, I’d be able to.” It was a fib, but I planned to watch the YouTube that evening so it wouldn’t be. (I haven’t gotten around to it yet.)

“I guess thinking about all my shortcomings keeps you up at night,” I said.

Bert sighed. “Oh, Christine, you’re so far down on my list of problems. I’ve got a leaky roof and a cracking foundation, both here and at home. I’ve got a son who needs Cliff Notes for *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* and another one who thinks my husband and I don’t know the difference between Crown Royal and apple juice.”

For a second my heart was filled with compassion. Bert seemed like a real person, a woman I’d befriend if I were younger. But then I remembered she was a wicked witch who was out to rob me of my health insurance.

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Dammit! Bert is suddenly sitting less than a foot away. She’s snuck up on her prey (me!) as silently as a Great Horned Owl.

“I need to talk to you, Christine.”

I sweep my tongue across my Oreo-blackened teeth. “Okay,” I say warily.

“Ellie just called me. She quit. Didn’t give notice.”

“Wow.” I was waiting for the word “fired,” so it takes a while for what Bert has said to register. I’ll never see Ellie again.

“Can’t say I blame her,” Bert says. “She got a job that pays almost double what she was making here.”

“I’ll miss her.”

Bert wheels her chair closer to mine. “I’d appreciate it if you could pick up some extra hours, until I can get somebody hired.”

I can’t live with this stress any longer. “Do you mean one person to replace Ellie, or two people to replace both of us?”

She gets that look a manager gets when she’s going to claim her underling’s idea as her own.

“Look,” I say, “I know I’m not what you hoped for. I know you’re beyond frustrated with me. But Ellie’s taught me a lot.” I wish I could muster a morsel of sincerity: “I know I can learn this job.”

Out of nowhere, Bert says, “You’re on evening shift. It’s after 5:00 so you’re in charge. A severe thunderstorm watch is issued. What do you do?”

Why was I eating Oreos when I should’ve been reading those insipid policies? I take my iPhone out of my back pocket, hold down the button (it’s an iPhone 8) and say, “Call Bert Boss Lady.” When I’d added Bert to my contacts I didn’t know her last name. I wish now I would’ve asked somebody.

Bert furrows her eyebrows, retrieves her phone when it buzzes.

I don't give her time to say anything. "They've just issued a severe thunderstorm watch. What do I do?"

She rolls her eyes. "I might not answer."

"I've been here for six months. You never don't answer."

Bert knows I'm part lazy, part stupid, but part creative thinker. I can only hope she's way off on figuring out the percentages of those parts.

She sighs. "It isn't common knowledge yet but Andrea in human resources just gave her two weeks' notice. You'd have to know Excel, but not the myriad of computer skills you need to work in reference."

"I learned Excel at my last job." Human resources sounds a million times better than this. Anything does. How hard can Excel be?

"I'll see what I can do. I'm the head of the hiring committee."

I've never been a team player, but there's a first time for everything. "Meanwhile, I'll pick up extra hours whenever you need me here."

Bert stands, smiles at me. It might not be the first time she's smiled at me, but it's certainly the first time I've deserved it. "Thank you, Christine."

I wait until Bert is gone from my line of vision. Then I pull up our library's website. Starting salaries—and other stuff that was top secret at my old job—are on display for every Tom, Dick and Harry.

I know the Peter Principle, where employees rise to the level of their incompetence. But I don't know the principle where you're inept to begin with, so they transfer you to human resources where you make three dollars more an hour.