

The Mall

I was walking naked through the crowds, hoping no one would notice me. Only two minutes before departure and I absolutely had to catch the next train. I could see the platform on the other side of the tracks but had to ascend a stairway and cross over a bridge to get there.

Just as I was coming down the steps and running for the car, the doors closed. I could see the passengers inside pointing their fingers at me and laughing. I'm not sure why, but it wasn't because I was nude. The train slowly pulled out of the station, leaving me standing there, the only person on the platform, not knowing what to do. I had missed my one chance for freedom and there were no more trains after this.

I retraced my steps to the ticket gate, returned my unused ticket to the stationmaster who refused to give me a refund, then squeezed through the exit and went back outside.

There was a huge shopping mall on the other side of a busy thoroughfare. It was the biggest, longest, tallest shopping mall I had ever seen. Dodging cars and trucks, I jaywalked across the street, passed through an enormous parking lot with cars jammed side by side, and walked through the broad entrance to the elevator. I could've gotten off on any of the floors but decided to go all the way to the top.

I knew immediately that I didn't want to be there. There was nothing I wanted to buy. The first shop I passed was selling watches, but I didn't care what time it was. The second was selling bags, but I had nothing to carry. The third was selling men's clothes, but I obviously didn't need any. The fourth was selling appliances, but I certainly had no use for a washing machine. And so on.

I immediately went back to the elevator. I tried to find the "down" button but there wasn't one. Then I noticed a sign by the door saying that the elevator only took people up, not down.

I looked around for a stairwell but couldn't find one. In the distance I could see an information booth with a woman at the counter smiling and nodding her head at customers as they walked by.

I rushed over to her and asked, "Could you please tell me how to get out of here?"

She looked at me surprised.

"You are not permitted," she said.

"What do you mean I'm not permitted?"

"Just what I said. You're not permitted."

"Why not?"

"There's no way out."

"You can't keep me here against my will!" I protested.

"Don't get excited," she said softly, putting her arms out and trying to calm me down. "It's not my fault, you know."

Then she bent over the counter, looking furtively both ways before speaking.

"Listen," she whispered. "I'll tell you something that I don't tell everyone. You see that door over there?"

She pointed to a gray unmarked door between two shops a bit further down. I nodded.

"Knock on the door. There's a man inside. If he's willing to open the door for you, you can talk to him. He may be able to help you."

"Thanks," I said, bowing slightly then immediately dashing away towards the door.

I knocked. There was no answer. I knocked again. Still no answer. The third time the door slowly opened. In the dim light I could see the head of a man with white hair wearing a seaman's cap.

"Whaddya want?" he asked in a surly voice.

"Could you please tell me where the exit is?"

"Why do you want to know?"

"Because I'd like to leave."

"Have you got a receipt for your purchases?"

"No," I replied. "I haven't bought anything."

"Why not?"

"There's nothing here I really need."

"Doesn't matter," the man said. "You have to buy something. *Anything.*"

"But I haven't got any money."

“Then too bad for you,” the man snickered. “You shouldn’t’ve come here in the first place.”

“So what should I do?”

“If you can’t prove that you bought something, then I can’t help you.”

“But you must be able to do something.”

“Sorry, it’s against regulations. I just do what I’m told. No ifs, ands, or buts about it.”

“Can you at least tell me where the manager’s office is? I’d like to file a complaint.”

The man doubled over with laughter and then said, “A lot of good that would do you!”

I turned away and began heading down the mall, looking for the manager’s office. I tried to quicken my pace but was held back by clusters of people stopping here and there, examining this and that, trying to decide whether or not to buy any or all of the items on display. I caught a glimpse of the price tags on some tacky trinkets in one of the shops. Nothing there for less than a couple thousand dollars.

I walked for several miles past shop after shop after shop, not finding anything that even remotely looked like a manager’s office. A few hours later it occurred to me that the mall had no end. There was no manager’s office. There was no manager. He didn’t exist.

The crowds were just as thick here as they were everywhere. I sat down on a bench watching the people pass. There was no escape from the banality. My only recourse was to beg for money so that I could buy something and leave.

I held out my hand to a well-dressed man.

“Sorry, no spare change,” he said.

I held out my hand to a matronly looking woman. She brushed past not saying a word.

Passing children jumped up and down, shouting, “Look at the bum! Look at the bum!”

Finally someone I didn’t see tossed me a quarter.

“Chump,” I heard a voice say.

I was thinking how bad it was that I’d missed my train.